

**All Men are Created Equal:  
Langston Hughes's Opposition to Discrimination  
Against African Americans**

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**A Thesis presented to the English Department  
the University of Oslo  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Master degree  
Spring Term 2005**

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## Preface

When I was first acquainted with Langston Hughes, what struck me as his most prominent feature was the stamina of his will to revive and preserve the dignity of his race. He never seemed to have chosen the easy way out of any situation, or to allow himself to be abstracted from his task. He refused to imitate the life style of white people, although his complexion was light enough to allow him to pass for a Mexican or a Latino. In his effort to identify with the blacks he regarded himself as all black, and used all his talents and his energy to better the situation for African Americans. In this thesis I have examined to some extent the reasons for this attitude, and given a few examples of how he went about to achieve his aim. His production is so huge that it was necessary to concentrate on a small section of it. I have chosen a selection of articles from his column in the *Chicago Defender*, a few of his poems, and the history book *Black Magic*. To pinpoint the development in the African American's cause, I have concentrated on the segregation policy, and the different stages of the practice of it. I have tried to depict the historical background, and to give an account of the current event that spurred his articles or his poems. In this way I have attempted to show the progress in the blacks' fight for equality, and in the gradual abandonment of segregation. In this process I have employed the method of New Historicism, and viewed the text in the context of the cultural conditions of its time of production. It seems very appropriate in this case to see the making of a text as an interactive process, the text being "both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes" (Abrams 183). I have chosen three fields to look into. Chapter I concentrates on the African American artists and their performances in theatres, clubs, and cafes. Chapter II is about employment and the financial conditions of African Americans, and Chapter III deals with education.

## Introduction.

Langston Hughes's literary production has a wide range, and according to the critics the variety is just as notable in quality as it is in genre. There seems, however, to be a general consensus that his artistic values were of an undisputable high quality. The dissension appears to stem from his lack of ability to make the sufficient effort to hone his tool into brilliance. James Baldwin, when reviewing *Selected Poems* (1959), gives vent to his frustration in *The New York Times Book Review* of March 29, 1959, as follows: "Every time I read Langston Hughes I am amazed all over again by his genuine gifts, and depressed that he has done so little with them" (*Critics* 37).

Baldwin is not the only one to hold this opinion. Hughes seems to have slackened over the years. His first poems were welcomed with jubilation, and his blues and jazz poems still tower in the world of poetry. However, he obviously had his ups and downs all along. As early as in 1931, hoping to publish a book of verse with the publisher Alfred A. Knopf, Hughes sent a collection of poems to Carl Van Vechten for approval. Van Vechten told him that he found the poems to be insignificant, and that they would mean a decline from his earlier achievements, "The Weary Blues" and "Mulatto". He actually told Hughes: "I shouldn't wonder if you are pretty nearly through with poetry" (Rampersad 197). Still, Hughes sent the manuscript to Knopf, who rejected it. One of the editors, Bernard Smith, made an interesting observation: "The non-racial lyrics were 'neither distinguished nor important,' all the best poems were in the section devoted to racial protest. . . . After the high quality of *Not Without Laughter* the book would be an act of retrogression" (Rampersad 197). At about this time, in 1932, Hughes is known to have exclaimed to Claude McKay: "I've

never felt so un-poetic in my life. I think I shall write no more poems. I suppose I am not miserable enough. I usually have to feel very bad to put anything down and terrible to make up poems” (Rampersad 172). Also according to other critics, the genuinely good poems are all to be found in connection with his early period. In 1949, in his review of *One Way Ticket* in the *Saturday Review* of January 22nd, Saunders Redding is merciless in his condemnation: “It is a tribute to Langston Hughes’s earlier accomplishments that his reputation continues undimmed by verse which of late is often jejune and iterative. Intellectual recognition of the thinning out of his creativeness is inescapable, but emotional acceptance of the fact comes hard. An old loving admiration simply will not die” (*Critics* 31). He calls the volume “stale, flat and spiritless” and continues: “The reason for this dull level of lifelessness has a simple explanation. Hughes harks back to a youthfulness that is no longer green. He has long since matured beyond the limited expressive capacity of the idiom he uses in *One Way Ticket*. . . . While Hughes’s rejection of his own growth shows an admirable loyalty to his self-commitment as the poet of the ‘simple, Negro common-folk’, the peasant, the labourer, the city slum-dweller-, it does a disservice to his art. And of course the fact is that Langston Hughes is not now, nor ever truly was one of the simple common people” (*Critics* 31).

The way I interpret this statement is that Hughes has not been paying attention to the development in African American society. The accusation seems to be that when he continues to employ oversimplified symbols, idioms, and words in general, he is suggesting that the African Americans are in the same position in 1949 as they were in the 1920s. To put it bluntly, he is accused of being totally out of touch, as if he himself has grown, but does not recognise progress in his favourite subject, African Americans. Two years later, in 1951, in *The New York Times Book Review* of May 6th, Babette Deutsch states that she finds the same limitations in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. After having praised Hughes’s gifts as an artist writer, she continues: “Yet the book as a whole leaves one less responsive to the poet’s

achievements than to the limitations of folk art. . . . His verse suffers from a kind of *contrived naivetè*. . . . It is a pity that a poet of undeniable gifts has not been more rigorous in his use of them” (*Critics* 32; italics mine). On the same page Babette Deutsch claims that he is “a popular singer because he has elected to *remain one*” (*Critics* 32; italics mine).

If this is the case, it suggests either that Hughes is condescending, or that he remains loyal to his vocation. In my opinion, the latter is the case. At an early stage of his career Hughes deliberately chose the voice of the oppressed, the dialect of the lower-class blacks, to convey his message. He is also the person who accused Countee Cullen of wanting to be white, because he preferred to be called just a writer, not a black writer. Hughes himself wanted very much to be black, in fact, it is amazing how strong this urge was, taking into consideration how small an amount of his origin actually was African American. Both his grandfathers were white and one of his grandmothers was a Native American. Still, his outburst when he saw Africa for the first time rejects all but his “black blood”: “My Africa! Motherland of the Negro peoples! And me a Negro!” (*The Big Sea* 10). “Negro” or not, Hughes’s poems are a tribute to the black race, in form as well as in content. His most popular form he found in the black music, the blues and jazz. This music is derived from African American song, the basic instrument of illiterate people to express all kinds of feelings. The blues in particular conveys something archetypal, authentic, and powerful. It embraces body and soul, pain and pleasure, and it appears to be created by an ability to live, enjoy, and suffer, which the white man seems to have civilized away. Hughes transferred this music into poetry, and in doing so, he acknowledged his background and demonstrated his main project, to show the world that African Americans have a dignity of their own, and do not have to adapt to “the ways of white folks”.

If this colloquial style seemed out of place in his later period, it was mostly his poetry which suffered from it. His “Simple” stories were highly valued, and in contradiction to

Saunders Redding in his review of *One Way Ticket* mentioned above, Carl van Vechten claims that Hughes really “belongs” in black society: “He is so completely at home when he writes about Harlem that he can be both careless and sloppy”, he says, and continues: “In his Simple books he is seldom either, and *Simple Takes a Wife* is a superior achievement to the first of the series, *Simple Speaks His Mind* (*Critics* 33). The Simple stories, being a kind of philosophy about general human matters, undoubtedly served their purpose in providing the black audience with a face, an individuality, a suffering, contemplating person. If one wants to trace the progress in the black people’s struggle for equality, however, his articles, also in the *Chicago Defender*, are a better source, due to the fact that he there comments directly on current events.

Hughes has been called “one of the more controversial names in the history of American poetry” (*CP* 3). To be controversial requires strength, and Langston Hughes does indeed stand out in the crowd as a very determined and strong young man. While the attitude expressed by most of the African American society in the early 1900s tended towards assimilation, Hughes wanted whole heartedly to preserve the heritage from earlier generations and restore the dignity of black Americans. He thought ill of those who imitated the life style of the white majority, and in *The Big Sea* he expresses this feeling: “The ‘better class’ Washington colored people . . . were in the whole as unbearable and snobbish a group of people as I have ever come in contact with anywhere. They lived in comfortable houses, had fine cars, played bridge, drank Scotch, gave exclusive ‘formal’ parties, and dressed well, but seemed to me all together lacking in real culture and good common sense” (Miller 14). He also said: “The irony is that these blacks accept and mirror the absurd values of the American main stream, which segregates blacks even as it praises their exoticism and primitivism” (Miller 14).

Hughes's pride in his African origin may well have had something to do with his father. They were poles apart, and it might be suggested that his dedication to "the black struggle" was partly triggered by his father's attitude to suppressed people in general. Hughes writes in *The Big Sea*: "My father had a great contempt for poor people. He thought it was their own fault that they were poor". He added: "My father hated Negroes. I think he hated himself, too, for being a Negro" (Jemie xxiv). Needless to say, Hughes's relationship with his father was very difficult, and Jemie states that he was close to suicide the summer of 1919, during his stay with him (xxiv). Langston was seventeen at that time. Opposing his father would be the natural reaction of any seventeen year old, so in this way his father may well have been an influential factor in the forming of young Langston's convictions. Faith Berry seems to agree with this view. She says about "The Negro Speaks of Rivers": "It emerged in part from thoughts about his father, whose racial attitudes Hughes found so different from his own"(24). The strongest impact, however, appears to have been his Native American grandmother. His delight in her is obvious in the following: "You see, my grandmother was very proud, and she would never beg or borrow anything from anybody. She sat, very much like an Indian, copper-colored with long black hair, just a little grey at places at seventy, sat in her rocker and read the Bible, or held me in her lap and told me long, beautiful stories about people who wanted to make the Negroes free, and how her father had apprenticed to him many slaves in Fayetteville, North Carolina, before the war, so that they could work out their freedom under him as stone masons. And once they had worked out their purchase, he would see that they reached the North . . . She was the last surviving widow of John Brown's raid . . . Nobody ever cried in my grandmother's stories" (*The Big Sea* 17).

Another factor in the process of finding his vocation was his time at Columbia University. After arriving in New York to start his education there, he had a week before



classes started, and he spent it getting acquainted with Harlem. Berry says: “There was still a mixed racial community in 1921, but it was already called ‘the Negro Capital of the world’ . . . Langston Hughes was fascinated: ‘I wanted to shake hands with them, speak to them!’” (27). He also was impressed to find that famous black artists whom he had read about in the black press, lived in his neighbourhood. The fact that he could actually meet them on the street thrilled him immensely. It is not difficult to understand his fascination with Harlem. Here, obviously was a community where one actually embraced and applauded black people, a place to be if not proud of being black, then certainly not ashamed either. And the atmosphere! Berry confirms this comprehension of the young man’s state of mind: “At age nineteen, Hughes was much taken with the myth of Harlem’s exoticism as any white person during the nineteen twenties. His youthful impression of a gay, rollicking Harlem outweighed any realization that it was a community whose growing economic and social problems were causing it to emerge as a ghetto. But he learned” (28).

In sharp contrast to his time spent in Harlem, stood his existence at the university. He was not comfortable there. At first, it turned out that the university authorities had not realized, at the time, that they were assigning a room at the dormitory to a coloured person. This was generally not done, and on his arrival they were reluctant to admit him. It was a bad start, and things did not improve. Nothing seemed to agree with him. He found his subjects, except for the English Literature, boring. In addition, Berry calls his assignment as part of the reportorial staff at *The Spectator*, the Columbia University newspaper, “an unpleasant joke. He was asked to cover the fraternity beat and social events, but Afro-Americans were not welcomed into fraternity hours or at social functions” (29). These factors obviously also contributed to the decision he made at the end of the academic year. He then left the university and moved to Harlem to spend all his energy on his literary endeavours. The experience of this period, feeling so at home in black society and so out of place among the

whites, must have influenced and strengthened his determination to identify with, and engage himself in, the black struggle.

When Zell Ingram and Langston Hughes returned from Haiti in 1931, they had an encounter with a lady who was going to be of the greatest importance to Hughes's attitude towards the African Americans. The two young writers were received by Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune, also called "America's leading Negro woman", at her home in Daytona Beach. Here, in 1904, she had founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial School for Negro Girls. This formidable lady hitchhiked with them to the North, to the young men's delight. "What luck for us", Hughes would recall of an encounter so timely as to be almost providential. 'We shared Mrs. Bethune's wit and wisdom, too, the wisdom of a jet-black woman, who had risen from a barefooted field hand in a cotton patch to be head of one of the leading junior colleges in America, and a leader of her people.' At the crucial moment, on his return to the United States, he had found the perfect figure to counteract in his mind the still unvanquished image of godmother. Big-boned, black-skinned, and dynamic, at once both commanding and maternal, Mrs. Bethune seemed to personify for Langston, in this pivotal moment of his life, what their race might be, and he himself might be in his relationship to it" (Rampersad 211). This remarkable lady had set out, at the age of twentynine, with one dollar and fifty cents as her sole monetary possession, and founded her school. The institution grew quickly, and she soon found herself to be the focus of black society in Daytona. She was a brilliant organizer, and prominent black leaders were quick to recognize her. Rampersad tells us: "Appointed first by Calvin Coolidge, then by Herbert Hoover, to the "National Child Welfare Commission," she gave advice to both presidents on race and education, - eventually she would serve five presidents in this way" (212). Where segregation was concerned, it was not tolerated on the campus of Daytona Beach. Mrs. Bethune solicited support from white people, both locals and visitors, and at least on one occasion she organized a protest against the Ku Klux Klan. It was

she, too, who set Hughes on the track of reading tours, which was to become his main income over several years. “You should go all over the South with your poems, she urged him. People need poetry” (Rampersad 212). She obviously was of great significance in young Langston’s career as a poet.

Whatever caused it, Hughes turned to the roots of black life and black culture for themes as well as for the techniques to express them. In retrospect it is inevitable to regard him as a pioneer in advance of the cultural movement in the 1960s and 1970s, when “everybody went ethnic” and the black people marched for their rights. His message, like theirs, was: “We shall overcome”.

Pride is a key word with Langston Hughes. It is when exposing the proud black woman and the proud black man he hits his white audience the hardest with the insanity of treating these people like inferiors to themselves. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is his most outstanding testimony to the pride he felt in belonging to the black race (*CP* 23). It is also evidence of his conviction of his project at an early stage of his life. He wrote it at the age of seventeen right after his graduation from high school in 1920, on the train to Mexico to spend that disastrous summer with his father. It is a fascinating scene; here is this young man, a rare mixture of genes, not particularly dark-skinned, sitting by a train window and being given these powerful words, acting as a medium to talk on behalf of black Americans.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is a tribute to the black man, not to a “sad mulatto” like himself, and it is a powerful manifestation of the significance of the black people in the past. The poem implies that the black man’s wisdom and strength is derived from his long coexistence with nature and God. The river, the symbol of eternity, deep, ever flowing and mysterious, has transferred to the black man its immortality: “my soul has grown deep like the river”. It indicates that he was present at the first of our known cultures, the river-cultures at

the Euphrates and the Tigris, and then follows his ascent throughout history, towards ever greater skill.

First he uses the image of the primitive tribe member, asleep in his humble hut by the river Congo, perfectly contented in his unpretentious existence. At the next stage of his progress, the Negro is shown as the proud and capable constructor of one of the world's wonders. Now he is not sleeping by the river. He is placed above it, overlooking it to find a site for his masterpiece. "I looked upon the Nile/and raised the pyramids above it".

After having situated the Negro in such an elevated position, the poet does not have to spell out to the reader the abhorrence of the act of making the Negro a slave and treating him like cattle. He only emphasizes the stupidity and the cruelty of it by telling us that eternity rejoices when the injustice is undone: "I heard the singing of the Mississippi/and I've seen its muddy bosom burn all golden in the sunset", when Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. The repetition of the phrase "My soul has grown deep like the river" turns it into a warning: "Remember my worth. I am as good as you are. Perhaps better".

Jemie tells us: "The poem is related to Zora Neal Hurston's judgement of the mythic High John de Conquer, whom she held as a symbol of the triumphant spirit of the black America: that John was of the 'Be' class, Be here when the ruthless man comes, and be here when he is gone" (103-104). By making the black man present from the earliest times and emphasizing his presence through the stages of history, Hughes assures his readers that the black man also will survive for the future, and again restore his dignity and power. The repetition of the personal pronoun at the beginning of four successive lines places the subject of the black man in a universal position, strikingly emphasizing his worth:

I bathed in the Euphrates  
I built my hut near the Congo  
I looked upon the Nile  
I heard the singing of

This poem proved to be of great significance to Hughes's career. He sent it to Jessie Fauset. "I took the beautiful dignified creation to Dr. Du Bois," Fauset recalled, 'and said: What colored person is there, do you suppose, in the United States who writes like this and is still unknown to us?"' (Watson 53). Du Bois published it in his magazine, *The Crisis*, the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP. W.E.B. Du Bois was regarded as "the forefather" of the Harlem Renaissance, and the magazine, which was founded in November 1910, was "the magazine that paved the way for the Renaissance" (Watson 17). It had a large readership, about 95,000 in 1919, mostly middle class. Consequently, the effect of Hughes's first publication must have been to give him a flying start as a spokesman for his people's rights. Du Bois had high aspirations for the black race: "They combined progressive race-politics, (African-Americans should develop their own institutions, write about their own experience, embrace pan-Africanism), and elitist uplift, (Howard University, domestic property, Dunbar Apartments). The block of socially aspiring Negroes about whom Du Bois wrote was known as the Talented Tenth and derisively known as 'the dicties'. . . Du Bois predicted: 'The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worthy of saving up to their vantage ground'" (Watson 18-19). Being included in this circle gave Hughes an excellent vantage point to realize his poetic vocation. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" paved the way to his position by making his audience "listen" when he spoke. One of the most significant departments in which he let his voice be heard was the practice of segregating blacks and whites in their everyday life.

The segregation policy was mostly a southern phenomenon, and to trace its roots it is necessary to go all the way back to the civil war. The reason for the extreme hostility towards blacks in the South, much more prominent than in the North, is to be found in the environment and the climate of the two parts of the continent. The South was ideal for the big tobacco and cotton plantations, where great numbers of unskilled labour were needed. Thus

the South came to build its economy on black slaves, and succeeded to the point that they wanted to break out of the Union. The North with its industrial areas was constantly fed with cheap white labourers who never made it on their own beyond the first harbour, so slavery was never practised to the same degree there. They never became dependant upon it. So, when Abraham Lincoln needed help to defeat the rebels of the South, he could afford to make the emancipation of the slaves his main aim, in order to get much needed assistance from Europe. When the South was finally defeated in 1865, it did not mean just a surrender. It marked the end of a culture. After four years of war the South lay with broken back. The people were starving, the fields ruined, the big plantation houses plundered or burned down by passing Northern troops. On top of it all the Southerners were told that their slaves, who they had previously regarded as so much property, now were their equals in all respects. To expect this society of abrupt and forced equality to function from day one would have been extremely naïve. There is a limit to the amount of injustice, rightly felt or not, a society can take before it erupts, and the government in Washington had to soften the blow to mitigate the hatred from the population in the South. This was done by sanctioning the bill of “White control of the South”. The Southerners interpreted this as a permission to treat the blacks any way they wanted. Since they could not take revenge on the federal government for all their losses, they took out their hatred on the blacks, and dared the federal government to interfere.

One way of manipulating the justice system was to prohibit black people from the jury system, and even though the Supreme Court had established their right to act as jurors, this right was very seldom put into practice. The legal system was slowly and gradually changed by complicated manoeuvres and sanctioned by the laws of the city or state. In this way the prohibitions were made legal, and the segregation became the everyday way of life. The penalty for violating the laws was often death, and many African Americans gave their lives to save their dignity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, conditions became desperate.

In 1905 a conference was held, instigated by Andrew Carnegie, and including black leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. They made a resolution to press for absolute civil, political, and public equality. In 1910, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed, and the NAACP charter was signed by several prominent persons, including Du Bois, Jane Addams, and Lincoln Steffens. Its agenda was straightforward: “To secure the basic citizenship rights guaranteed by the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendment to the United States Constitution. Most specifically this meant an end of all segregation laws, a right to equal education, and a guarantee of the right to vote” (*To Make Our World Anew* 377-382). Their fight was an uphill struggle though, and the civil rights proved to be even more difficult to obtain than the political rights.

This is the reality Langston Hughes was born into. In 1909 he was seven years old. In 1919, at the age of seventeen, he wrote “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, and in 1944 we find him still going strong about his theme: equality and respect. He ran at that time a column in the *Chicago Defender*. It is only a small part of his production of that period, but it was very useful in his effort to reach white people with his claims for the blacks. Ruth Reese says about his Simple figure: “He was a spokesman whom from day to day told about what the Negroes felt and meant, seen from the little man’s sad platform, in a sublime form of humorous wagging” (197; translation mine). The part about Simple occupied about a third of Hughes’s column in the *Chicago Defender*, and it proved to be a huge success. According to Reese it made white people start reading the *Chicago Defender* and thereby made them susceptible to his comments on current events. Inevitably it also strengthened his reputation as a writer, and helped bringing attention to the rest of his production.

## Chapter I

### *Worship and Persecution: The Ordeal of the Artists*

#### Justice

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That Justice is a blind goddess  
Is a thing to which we blacks are wise.  
Her bandage hides two festering sores  
That once perhaps were eyes.(CP 31).

“Justice” was first published in *Amsterdam News* in April 1923. At that time Langston Hughes worked as a mess boy aboard the *Oronoke*. It was anchored at Jones Point, a few miles south of West Point, to serve as mother-ship to the *Bellbuckle* and the *West Hassayampa*. Rampersad tells us that he was very productive during this period. After he had recovered from his disappointment when he learned that the ship was “going nowhere”, he found the surroundings and his shipmates, being of many nationalities, inspiring (Rampersad 61).

He was twenty-one years old, and according to the records, eager for life and adventure, bursting to fight injustice as he had experienced it so far. As this was before his trip to the South, where he was confronted with really hateful segregation for the first time, this poem can be read as a testimony from a young soul, an outburst of frustration from one who still expects life to be just, one who is not yet worn out by a lifetime of maltreatment.

Like most of his racial poems, “Justice” conveys a serious message. To picture justice as a goddess is nothing new, and she has often been accused of blindness. What makes this poem so visual, and thereby powerful, is the third line, imagining her eyes as “festering sores” behind her “bandage”. The vivid picture of a piece of cloth, soiled by the rotten liquid from



the sores, across the face of the noblest symbol of democracy, hits the reader hard. It indicates not only malfunctioning in society, it claims that the society is in decay. The poem is universal. There is only one word to classify it as a racial protest, the word “black” in the second line. Except for that single word the poem could have been written about any field of injustice, or any group of oppressed people, or any particular incident. However, it is, as we in our days recognize, the undisputable truth about the conditions of the black people in the U.S.A. at that time. There was no justice for African Americans in 1923, in any field of existence, in the nation whose creed it was that “all men are created equal”. They were discriminated in every possible way. They were, for instance, abused as persons even as they were celebrated as artists. They were the last to get a job and the first to lose it, and their chances of getting an education were strictly limited. This could hardly be called democracy, and “Justice” is one of Hughes’s first attacks on the lack of democratic practice in the U.S.A.

Hughes’s poems “Children’s Rhymes” is somewhat related to “Justice”:

What’s written down  
for white folks  
ai’nt for us a-tall  
“Liberty and Justice-  
Huh-for all.”(*CP* 390).

All though “Justice” and this jingle share the same theme, the failure of democracy, the latter has singled out the targets of the unjust treatment. By naming the “white folks” as the fortunate ones, Hughes places their opposite, the blacks, as the maltreated. The achievement of this alteration is immediately revealed. The evasive, all embracing accusation in “Justice” leaves the reader with too much to cope with. Yes, we agree, life is not just. That is the way of the world, and something that everybody experiences sooner or later. This is knowledge so old that we have idioms in our language to describe it. In this light there does not seem to be much we can do to remedy this state of affairs. In “Children’s Rhymes”, though, the injustice has been narrowed down to something we actually can do something about. Hughes pinpoints

the situation of the African Americans, and thereby makes it everybody's responsibility. The reference to the written words elevates the issue to the highest level of authority, and the very foundation of the nation. Brown refers to this time as when "certain notion of liberty, justice, and equality were cited, justified, and of course, written down, in various guises, in the Declaration of Independence and later in the Constitution of the United States" (*CLC* Vol. 10, 281). What Brown calls "the ironic ambiguity" of the verse is expressed in the third and the fourth line: "ain't for us a-tall / Liberty and Justice". A society which excludes a whole group of its members from their constitutional rights is neither liberal nor just. As Brown phrases it: In this way the white Americans failed their own ideal, and "denied themselves the substance of those libertarian ideas that have been enshrined in the sacred rhetoric, and history, of the American Revolution" (*CLC* Vol. 10, 281). In this way the American society is inflicting damage upon itself. It is the same accusation as the line "festering sores" in "Justice" indicates, only more precise.

The form, too, of the "Children's Rhymes", increases the impact of the message. In choosing the children as speakers, Hughes reveals that the injustice has penetrated all levels of the black community. It can be seen as an indication that the practice has become so common that the children chant about it in accompaniment to their play, without reacting to the content of the words. Brown is of a different opinion, though. He calls their chanting "knowing sneers about nonexistent liberty and justice" (*CLC* Vol. 10, 281). However, the effect is the same. If Hughes's intention is to demonstrate political consciousness and bitterness in the children, the accusation is just as hard.

The oral style and the dialect in the verse serve to underline the identity of the speaker. In phrasing the last two lines as direct speech, Hughes forces the reader to meet the speaker face to face. One is left with an image of the black man or the black child turning and walking away in disgust at the white man's deceit: "Huh-For all". On the whole, the choice of words

and the layout of the verse seem deliberate and well planned. The comparison between the two poems seems to confirm Bernard Smith's statement above, that "all the best poems were in the section devoted to racial protest". Although "Justice" is very striking in its clipped and simple form, it seems to be the product of a moment's inspiration, received and written down with no further pondering. If Hughes had really worked on it to perfect it, he would have rewritten the second line. The word "thing" is a sloppy expression in almost any context, and should be avoided in such a short poem, where every single word carries great significance. This might be an early sign of the characteristic which in later years brought critics to accuse him, as mentioned above, of a laziness that led to lack of perfection in his works.

On the other hand quite the opposite could be the case. Hughes was very determined, determined to achieve better conditions for his race, and the size of his production bears witness to that fact. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that he may have gained in quality if he had reduced the quantity of the works which were steadily streaming from his pen. It is hard to alter one's natural inclinations, though, and Hughes was in a hurry, always on the run, seeking new places, new challenges, and new ways to fight for his conviction, fighting the injustice he saw practiced in his surroundings every day. The poems "Justice" and "Children's Rhymes" include all aspects of existence. In my opinion they can serve as an opening declaration, a base for Hughes's exploration of all the different departments where the blacks were suppressed and scorned. One of these departments is the realm of the entertainers.

The importance of the artists in paving the way to equality between the races can hardly be overestimated. The written word in all its variations was naturally a most efficient tool, and poets and authors and journalists certainly made their contribution. Still, black music, with its playing and dancing and singing artists, took a shortcut to the hearts of the whites. "The Harlem Renaissance" is perhaps the most striking example of this fashion, and it was here, in the realm of entertainment, that segregation came to its most absurd display. The exoticism of

the “black arts” were in strong demand among the white population already in the 1920s, when the white middle class invaded the cafes and clubs in Harlem. In those early days it was unimaginable to regard the black artist to be anything close to equal to his white spectators. He was simply an underling with a rare gift, a monkey with one amazing trick, who was allowed to appear in the proximity of his white audience only as long as he was good at this trick of his. The fact that “the trick”, the captivating power and disturbing appeal in the blues and jazz, was the result of generations of suffering and agony, was not recognized. In the *Langston Hughes Reader*, we read: “‘The Blues! Songs folks make up when their heart hurts, that’s what the Blues are. Sad funny songs – too sad to be funny and too funny to be sad.’” Thus one of the characters in the Negro play, *DON’T YOU WANT TO BE FREE?*, at the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, defines the Blues. Then he goes on to say: ‘Colored folks made up the Blues. . . . We made ‘em out of being poor and lonely, and homes busted up, and broke’” (*Reader* 159). This misery is heartbreakingly clearly expressed in Hughes’s opening poem of his first volume, “The Weary Blues”, published in February 1926 (*CP* 50).

The speaker of the poem is describing a singing pianist who plays on Harlem’s Lennox Avenue. The atmosphere is vividly created through the carefully chosen words, which lull the reader into the lazy rhythm of the blues: “Droning a drowsy . . . Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon. . . By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light”. The image of the ebony hands on the ivory keys becomes a dramatic reminder of the contrast between the conditions of the blacks and the conditions of the whites. R. Baxter Miller says: “Where poetic images exist, as part of human language, they necessarily contribute to emotive and moral discourse. For the Black American and social poet, they intensely reconfirm the tension between the pictured world (American Dream) and the real one (racial lynching)” (*Critics* 109). Even the poor piano is moaning, and the piano player’s stool is rickety. It is altogether a miserable life. The speaker of the poem shows his indignation at the treatment of the piano player when he says:

“He played the sad ragged tune like a musical fool”. This gives associations to the Fool of kings and noblemen in earlier times, who had to pay homage to his master in order to survive. Still, that fool often had to be very smart to be able to act his part sufficiently, and was in fact more often than not in a position to manipulate his superiors. Perhaps our piano player, while entertaining the white people, is a potential threat, despite his subdued position. The “thump, thump, thump went his foot on the floor” could indicate that. He may not be conscious of it himself, but his misery, which is so agreeably expressed to the whites, is a time bomb. History shows that there is a limit to how long injustice can be inflicted, and endured, before the mechanisms of equality tip the balance. The piano player tells the reader: “Ain’t got nobody in all this world/and I wished that I had died”. Finally he sleeps; “like a rock or a man that’s dead”, all worn out by his effort to satisfy his audience until the dawn of day: “The stars went out and so did the moon”.

The melting together of form, technique and theme in this poem is quite unique. Expressed through the blues, the theme, which is the piano player’s misery, becomes the pain of the artist and the pleasure of his audience. This technique serves to expose very clearly the immense abuse which is taking place. The picture of the white Americans applauding the black American’s despair is a harsh reminder to society that something must be done about such unfair conditions. They persisted, though, for decades to follow.

In 1967 Langston Hughes, together with Milton Meltzer, published *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the African-American in the Performing Arts*. In the foreword to the 1990 edition Ossie Davis calls Hughes “recording secretary to the tribe”, and states that he “considered it his job to keep the tribe together”. He continues in pointing out Hughes’s way of always reminding African Americans of the importance of their arts. The dancing and singing and all the black entertainment he says, is the only field in which the blacks are in control of the whites. He calls it “ an island of self-sufficiency set in a sea of almost universal

doubt” (*Black Magic* foreword). This makes sense. In fact, in retrospect it is hard to imagine any other spearhead sharp enough to pierce the invisible but seemingly impenetrable partition between blacks and whites. In this respect Langston Hughes’s contribution is unique, and *Black Magic* with its combination of facts, photographs and exciting story telling is yet another example of Hughes’s engagement in the black’s cause, and of the diversity of his production. Davies recognizes the significance in exhibiting the proud history of the black arts. He says: “Our art, to us, was always, and still is, a form of self-assertion, a form of struggle, a repository of self esteem that racism, Jim Crow, and the Ku Klux Klan could never beat out of us – the only authentic history that black folks have in America, because we made it ourselves” (*Black Magic* foreword).

On the flyleaf of the book Milton Meltzer tells us that it was to have no dedication, but right after it was finished and before it could be published, Hughes died. Meltzer says: “I think now, that the artists who played and sang and danced in the many works he created for them, and the audience to whom he gave such joy, would want to see the book dedicated “To Langston, with love.”

In the chapter called “Boulders in the Path” in *Black Magic*, Hughes tells a tale of situations which would have been ridiculous except for the personal tragedy they frequently involved. When touring the country, black artists had to suffer all kinds of humiliations. In 1937 the black jazz singer Bessie Smith, known as “Empress of the Blues”, died after a car accident, near Clarksdale, Mississippi. Rumour has it that she died because she was refused admittance to the hospitals close enough to save her life, because they were for whites only. By the time she arrived at the nearest black hospital, she had bled to death. Bessie Smith was regarded as the greatest jazz singer of her time by the black society. After her death she was canonized by all, blacks and whites, and the way she died became a heavy argument against segregation. Segregation of the audience was quite common, of course. The blacks were most

often exiled to the top gallery, ironically called “Nigger Heaven”. Worse still, in some places, like at the National Theatre in Washington, blacks were prohibited from entering. All black casts were popular, but mixed casts could not perform. In some cases this turned into absurd situations. Hughes says: “Colored concert artists could not use their regular accompanist if the pianist happened to be white (as was Kosti Vehanen with Marian Anderson), or else the pianist must be hidden behind a screen” (*Black Magic* 282). This scene implies a degree of self delusion among the whites verging on insanity, and one cannot begin to comprehend the bitterness it must have created in the heart of this one of history’s greatest singers. Sometimes following the restrictions would not be enough. When giving a concert in his home town of Birmingham, Nat King Cole was knocked down and nearly dragged from the stage by two white ruffians because they knew he had an integrated orchestra (*Black Magic* 282). In his case, it did not help that it was hidden behind a screen. This was as late as 1956.

Thirty-one years earlier, in 1925, Hughes wrote and published “The Jester”, describing the conditions of the performing artist. According to Hughes’s article in the *Chicago Defender* of September 23, 1944, the audience had started to mingle as early as that. Hughes is describing the situation at the famous Club Zanzibar at that time as follows: “Negro customers are usually led straight to the raised platform running around three sides. They are never put on the center-side facing the stage until the side seats are full, then maybe a few dark folks spill over onto the main level” (*Chicago Defender* 53-54). He ends his piece in putting forward what seems the only sensible suggestion: “Since white and colored people dance all over the same dance-floor there, and jitterbug and bump all up against each other, and nobody seems to mind it in the least, the sensible thing, it would seem to me, for the management of the Zanzibar to do, would be to let people of any color sit anywhere, and stop putting that chocolate band of humanity all around the walls” (*Chicago Defender* 54). Blacks

and whites dancing together. This seems to be a major improvement, at a rather early stage in the process.

For the artists, however, matters had not improved as late as 1956. At first this seemed an odd observation, but as Hughes tells us, it was only on the dance floor this social intercourse took place. Considering this fact, we land on the seemingly only possible explanation. Once again the white race and the black race are united in celebrating an art form, and the power of the arts becomes more significant than ever. Here are the couples on the dance floor, intertwining in their mutual pleasure in the dancing, perfectly equal, perfectly at ease in each other's company. The wall of segregation has vanished in thin air, or at least been hoisted to the skies in order to allow this interlude, this short truce. Then the music stops, and the wall comes crashing down again. The blacks and the whites go to their allotted stations, the blacks to form their humble "chocolate band" around the walls, the whites to claim, as a matter of course, their privileged places in the centre. The same farce is taking place in the theatre. The artists on the stage captivate their audience who give themselves over in the appreciation of the performance to the point that artists and audience are one body in the sharing of the art. Then the curtain falls, and the segregation is re-established. I think this is another evidence of the significance of the entertainers in the fight for equal rights. They were the fore runners, but they also were the ones who experienced the irrationality and the ordeals of the practice most tangible on body and soul.

In contrast to "The Weary Blues", which pinpoints the piano player in all his misery, "The Jester" embraces entertainers in general (*CP* 56). This "entity", which no society can function without, has been treated with various degrees of respect during the history of our civilization. In ancient Greece, the actors/entertainers were celebrated like half gods, both those who displayed their performing skills on the stage, and those who demonstrated their physical strength and endurance in the sports arena. In ancient Rome, the gladiators literally



fought for their lives, killing wildly in desperation to please their audience in order to survive themselves. Hughes's jester, however, is, like the piano player in "The Weary Blues", a direct reference to the King's Fool as we know him from Shakespeare's hand. The King's Fool did not have to kill to survive. His battle was of a different character, as his life depended upon his master's favour. He therefore had to dedicate his whole existence to please the king, to make him laugh, to amuse and entertain him. In order to obtain this he had to humiliate himself and relinquish all his feelings of dignity. So has Hughes's "black jester" been forced to do. He has become "the dumb clown of the world".

The opening image is a neat description of the perfect artist. It depicts an individual without individuality, playing whichever part that pleases his audience at a given time, suppressing his own personality in order to survive. He is the professional pleaser, on the stage of life :

In one hand  
I hold tragedy  
And in the other  
Comedy

All though the poem obviously is aimed at describing the situation of the performing artists, it can very well be read as an image of the blacks' position in general. In line 6, 7, 8, and 9 Hughes is scornful:

Laugh at me!  
You would laugh.  
Weep with me!  
You would weep.

Of course they would laugh, he seems to say. Not with me, but at me, regardless of the quality of my situation, tragedy or comedy. "You would weep" is also ironical in my opinion. What he actually is saying is: "As if you would weep! As if you could care less!" This is the closest he comes to an attack, except for the accusation that his "superiors" are "silly men".

Just as Holberg's servants often are allowed to outwit their masters, Shakespeare's fool is frequently given the upper hand in the struggle for power and influence over his surroundings. Acting the idiot, the fool often is equipped with a quick mind and a shrewd intelligence, qualities that were necessary to survive in the complicated, precarious life at court. Hughes refers to this fact at the end of his poem. "Once I was wise", he says, and the final line places our jester in an even worse position than his ancestor's when it reads: "Shall I be wise again?" This indicates that the fool has lost his capacity for manipulating his surroundings, and is now reduced to playing the part of the pathetic pleaser.

It is interesting to note that the end of the poem was written differently in *Opportunity* in December 1925. Back then it appeared as follows:

Shall I  
Be wise  
Again?

(CP 627). What he is actually asking here is: "Shall I be respected again? Shall I ever regain the power which I once had?" Hughes's jester does not regard himself as stupid. The line "I am the booted, booted, fool of silly men" indicates that it is his "superiors" who are at fault, because they are not able to recognize his values. It only takes their awakening to enable him to claim his rightful position in society. The way in which this phrase was emphasized in the first publication indicates its significance. It also naturally leads to the scrutiny of the line above, and to the realization of the marked break in form:

Once I was wise  
Shall I  
Be wise  
Again?

These four lines constitute the two last lines in the later editions. Put together they form an iambic pentameter in the best European tradition. They serve as an exclamation mark in question form to close the poem and leave the reader just a tiny bit disturbed. Here Hughes seems to have deliberately been mixing traditions in order to obtain a striking effect. Richard

K. Barksdale tells us in his *Hughes: His Times and His Humanistic Techniques* that by 1920, what seems to me a line of assimilation, rather than integration, of black artists was taking place in the white artistic society, as already referred to above. The creed was that by adapting Western techniques and practices, black writers, painters and sculptures would be admitted into a racially integrated society. It went so far as to even Europeanize the so-called spiritual and sorrow songs of the slaves (*Critics* 94-95). This was the tradition Hughes refused to adapt to, the tradition Countee Cullen followed to the extent that Hughes accused him of wanting to be white. Still, in “The Jester” he seems to have made a compromise, and I find the effect striking. These closing lines become almost rhetorical in their quest. Regarding the jester as a person it is indeed rhetorical. Wisdom is not a thing you can have, and lose, and regain. The jester does not need an answer. He is simply establishing the fact that he has lost his worth. Thereby the question gets this rhetorical ring to it. This quality is transferred to the image which the jester personifies, the image of the underestimated black source of amusement in the superior world of the white, there for them to treat as their mood dictates. There is nothing to indicate any change in his situation in the foreseeable future, and the last lines turn into a hopeless sigh rather than a question to be answered.

What caused the change in later editions can only be guesswork on my part. I would not rule out the possibility that Hughes himself made the alteration, knowing his urge to oppose the European influence. The form of the rest of the poem is very casual, however, and different from his folk tradition poems or his blues and jazz poems. It is simply a description of the existence of the “Black Jester”, hopeless as it is, with this somewhat detached question in the closing whether matters will improve or not in the future.

I find the atmosphere of the poem to be somewhat resigned, which I do not think was Hughes’s intention. This seems to be one of his poems which lacks “the finishing touch”. As mentioned before, the only parts of the text which serve to engage the temper of the reader is

the bit of sarcasm in line 6, 7, 8, and 9, and the closing. It would have gained by some of his famous irony. Nevertheless, it is an accurate description of white American attitude towards black Americans in general in the early 1900s, and because of the theme of entertainment, it comes naturally to focus on the artist as the speaker in the poem.

In 1955 Lena Horne called off a Miami Beach engagement because the hotel in which she was going to sing refused to register her for a room. The world wide celebrated, almost worshipped blues singer Billie Holiday, who held her fame and popularity until the day she died in 1959, is given a whole paragraph in Hughes's book: "Billie Holiday in *Lady Sings the Blues* describes her long bus tour with the Artie Shaw Band. 'Many of the restrooms along the highway were labelled FOR WHITE ONLY. I got to the place where I hardly ever ate, slept or went to the bathroom without having a major NAACP-type production. . . I got so tired of scenes in crummy roadside restaurants over being served. . . Some places they would not even let me eat in the kitchen. Some places they would. Sometimes it was a choice between me eating and the whole band starving. I got tired of having a federal case over breakfast, lunch and dinner'" (*Black Magic* 282). 1955, and still a long way to go. In order to illustrate the many setbacks in the fight against segregation, we will go back in time for about a decade.

Wheel about and turn about  
An' do jist so  
An' ebery time I wheel about  
I jump Jim Crow . . . (*Black Magic* 16).

"A little slave boy singing this refrain and cutting capers on a street corner, so the story goes, caught the attention of an itinerant actor-singer named 'Daddy Rice'. . . Anyhow, he picked up from this little black boy both his song and his dance, and with it Rice became famous. 'Daddy' Rice blackened his face like the little colored boy and dressed in rags when he sang 'Jump Jim Crow'. . . . Another entertainer, performing in burnt cork, David Emmet, borrowed the song from Rice and, as one of the first full time minstrel men carried it with acclaim

throughout the country. ‘Jump Jim Crow’ thus became the cornerstone of what was to be for eighty years America’s most popular form of entertainment, the black faced minstrels” (*Black Magic* 16-18). Later on Hughes goes on to inform us that “The Virginia Minstrels” were the first blackface show to play in New York. It opened in 1843 on the Bowery, and it was headed by the same Emmet (*Black Magic* 20).

Here we learn that in 1843, eighteen years before the outbreak of the Civil War, and twenty two years before the abolition of slavery, black art was publicly cheered. One might argue that this was merely white men in disguise, but according to Hughes, even the “real” blacks enjoyed the same kind of celebration, at least as early as the 1850s, “A New England colored group, the Luca Family – father, mother, and four sons – were a singing sensation on tours throughout the North before the Civil War. According to newspapers the Lucas were received with ‘the wildest enthusiasm’ in Boston in 1853” (*Black Magic* 28).

Hughes does not tell us anything about how the artists were treated off stage, but it is general knowledge that they were received in the homes of some political celebrities at this time, sometimes with the purpose to build a case against the South and have a moral excuse, in addition to the political urge to keep the union intact, to wage war against that region. However, one would have expected some progress in the integration of the races in a hundred years, even in the rigorous South. When we contemplate the contents of Billie Holiday’s testimony of 1955, this seems not to be the case. In between these dates we find Hughes’s poem “Minstrel Man”, (*CP* 61), also expressing the misery of the performing artist. The fight for equal rights seems to be a losing battle. Still, results are not always immediate, and “Minstrel Man” surely is a reminder of the fact that a considerable part of America’s human beings existed under conditions unworthy of a democratic society.

“Minstrel Man” was first published in *Crisis* in December 1925, and in *The New Negro* (*CP* 628). Here too, as in the case of “The Jester”, the editor has been busy with his pen, and

the alterations in this case have a stunning effect. Rampersad tells us that “ in *The New Negro*, the last lines of both stanzas ended with periods (‘So long.’ and ‘I die.’). Line 12 ended with a comma (‘My inner cry,’). The question marks were added for the *The Dream Keeper*, New York: Knopf 1932” ( *CP* 628). To demonstrate the difference between the two editions I would like to reproduce both versions of the poem.

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
And my throat  
Is deep with song  
You do not think I  
Suffer after  
I have held my pain  
So long.

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
You do not hear  
My inner cry,  
Because my feet  
Are gay with dancing  
You do not know  
I die.

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
And my throat  
Is deep with song,  
You do not think  
I suffer after  
I have held my pain  
So long?

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
You do not hear  
My inner cry?  
Because my feet  
Are gay with dancing  
You do not know  
I die?

It is quite interesting to observe how the alteration of three grammatical marks changes the relationship between the speaker of the poem, the minstrel man, and his audience. In the first edition the minstrel is deliberately hiding his pain because, it seems, he does not want his audience to recognize his misery. This attitude could only be dictated by pride, and that concurs perfectly with Hughes’s display of the black artist in some of his other works. The minstrel appears simply to be registering the mood of a situation in his thought. The poem thereby becomes a mental dramatic monolog, summing up the state of affairs. There is no accusation involved. Since the minstrel is so clever at hiding his suffering, he cannot, and, so it seems, does not expect his audience to pity him or to take action to help him better his position. The regular rhythm and stress on the four iambic feet which combine line one and

two and line three and four into two sentences, help underline the unbroken train of thoughts that is running through the minstrel's mind. The poem can also be seen as a whole.

Undisturbed as it is by grammatical marks it is possible to perceive it as a general knowledge and acceptance of his position, in the minstrel's mind.

The second edition reveals a plaintive and accusative person. His accusation can be interpreted in more than one way. It can be understood as scorn for the audience's stupidity and blindness to a simple fact, or as mere incredulity. In the latter of the two, the accusation becomes even fiercer, because this notion implies that the audience is pretending not to realize the pain behind the minstrel's thin varnish of gaiety. In fact, they are fully aware of it, and it does not bother them. His incredulous complaint may even be read to convey the suggestion that his pain is adding to their pleasure. All in all, the speaker of the poem emerges as a subdued and humiliated character.

Which is the most appealing of the two is a subjective decision. Which one is the most in Hughes's spirit is also hard to tell. However, I would suggest the 1925 edition. My argument is that although his characters are often plaintive, they always seem to counterbalance this quality with a sense of pride, this inheritance from former glorious times that are so vividly illustrated in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". The 1932 edition's speaker does neither convey any sense of pride, nor any suggestion of the threat or danger of revenge as a result of the suppresser's idiotic underestimation of his qualities. He simply is beaten, almost erased from the realm of humanity, as the last line indicates:

You do not know  
I die?

In a way, the suggestion that they ought to have known and ought to have done something about it, situates "them" above "him" and places him at their mercy. In the first edition, though, "they" are too stupid to even notice his misery. The minstrel is simply establishing the fact that they are going to lose their source of pleasure, a very valuable entity, because of

their own shortcomings. Thereby he places himself not only at the same level as them, but above them. This sense of pride, whether it is being expressed through humour, irony, or right out scorn, is a feature which I find to characterize Hughes's racial poems like a hallmark, and it is, in my opinion, the most powerful element in this section of his works. That is why my assumption is that this first edition is closest to Hughes's heart, and that the alterations in 1932 were made at the suggestion of the editor. In any case, these alterations can be read as another proof that the conditions of the minstrel – artist – entertainer had not improved in the interval between the two editions. In fact, they seemed to have declined in the hundred years and more between Billie Holiday's ordeal in 1955 and the success of the Luca Family in 1853. In order to understand this development, or lack of progress in the black's struggle for equality, it is necessary to take a closer look at the general conditions in American society at both periods.

In the year 1800 conditions were about to improve for the slaves in the upper South. As it dawned on science that the blacks were not some kind of half-beasts, white Americans began to cultivate a bit of guilt towards the practice of slavery. This, together with the slaves urge for freedom, led to a slackening of chains, both literally and imaginative. One of the first freedom fighters, Gabriel Prosser, actually planned an armed revolution. His aim was to free all slaves, march toward Richmond, and make Virginia a black state (*To Make Our World Anew* 169). His chance of success was obviously small, but the fact that such an action was even considered is a testimony to the spirit and hope among black Americans at that time. Then there was a disastrous setback, caused by Eli Whitney's cotton gin. This invention turned cotton into the country's principle export crop, and the production increased rapidly:

“In the year 1790 The south produced only 3,135 bales of cotton. By 1800 this figure had grown to 73,145 bales. . . . On the eve of the Civil War production peaked at 4.8 million bales. If ever circumstances conspired against a people, it was the coming together of the cotton gin, fertile land, and world demand. Once this happened, slaves who might have been set free by debt-and



conscious ridden Chesapeake planters were instead sold to the planters of the cotton growing Lower South. Cotton sealed the faith of slaves and slavery. . . . The sale and transportation of black people within the united states thus became big business

*(To Make Our World Anew 170-171).*

From these facts we may deduce that by the time of the Luca Family's success, the attitude among white Americans was that the black Americans were well under control. They were still just so many "hands", and their worth was only judged by their usefulness. They did not represent any kind of threat to the white's supremacy. The entertainers could safely be cheered as a few chosen, picked to please and amuse the white population.

In 1956, however, the background is changed altogether. Slavery has been abolished for almost a hundred years, and every day of that century the claim for equality has persisted. The black people are no longer confined to the role of serving the whites. We find them in high positions in most departments in society. Near the end of WWII Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., one of black America's most conscientious spokesmen and an effective congressman for Harlem, declared: "The black man continues on his way. He plods wearily no longer – he is striding freedom road with the knowledge that if he hasn't got the world in a jug, at least he has the stopper in his hand. . . . He walks conscious in the fact that he is no longer alone, no longer a minority" (*To Make Our World Anew 445*). No longer subdued by law, no longer a minority, in stark contradiction to the situation in 1800, the black population has now grown into a threat to the white domination of society.

It is an established fact that fear constitutes aggression, and in this case it may be seen as the direct cause of the hatred which was demonstrated towards the touring artists in the lower South. It is a nature-given instinct to fight for the best position in the pack, and human beings are no exception in that matter. The white audience had no choice but to kowtow to the brilliance of the black performers. Even if they had not appreciated their art, which they sincerely did, they would have had to submit to the fact that many of these artists were

celebrated all over the world. Their significance on the stage was undisputable and could not be touched. Still, they were not divinities, they had to eat, and then they were back to the normal position as blacks among whites and could be “put in their place.” My opinion is that this diehard resistance against equality was carried out by extremists, and against their own best convictions. There is no way that anybody could have claimed that this behaviour was decent or just. It was an attack in a weird kind of self-defence against the inevitable current of events. In *Black Magic* Hughes refers to Ethel Waters’s book *His Eyes is on the Sparrow*, where she tells about some experiences from her touring days down South. In Atlanta, she once had to leave the town in an old horse cart under the cover of darkness. The reason for this hasty departure was that she had a dispute with the white owner of the theatre she was performing in, over the tuning of a piano. As a consequence, he had her followed by the police, and gave orders that she should not be allowed to buy a railway ticket. In Macon, also in Georgia, she tells that “the body of a lynched boy was thrown into the lobby of a colored theatre as a warning to other Negroes not to be ‘uppity’”(282). These incidents, in all their insanity, can in my opinion only be seen as the desperate acts of irrational rage caused by plain fright. In the end they probably served the blacks better than any protest, by making them martyrs to their cause.

“Trumpet Player”

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The Negro  
With the trumpet at his lips  
Has dark moons of weariness  
Beneath his eyes  
Where the smoldering memory  
Of slave ships  
Blazed to the crack of wips  
About his thighs.

The Negro  
With the trumpet at his lips  
Has a head of vibrant hair  
Tamed down,  
Patent – leathered now  
Until it gleams  
Like jet –  
Were jet a crown.

The music  
From the trumpet at his lips  
Is honey  
Mixed with liquid fire.  
The rhythm  
From the trumpet at his lips  
Is ecstasy  
Distilled from old desire –

Desire  
That is longing for the moon  
Where the moonlight's but a spotlight  
In his eyes,  
Desire  
That is longing for the sea  
Where the sea's a bar glass  
Sucker size.

The Negro  
With the trumpet at his lips  
Whose jacket  
Has a *fine* one button roll,  
Does not know  
Upon what riff the music slips  
Its hypodermic needle  
To his soul –

But softly  
As the tune comes from his throat  
Trouble  
Mellows to a golden note. (*CP* 338).

One of the most internationally celebrated black artists in the early and midtwentieth century was the trumpet player Louis Armstrong. Born in 1901, he was Hughes's contemporary, and he was world famous for the sound of his golden instrument. In

combination with his raucous, bruised voice, his trumpet brought the themes of the blues and the jazz brilliantly home to his listeners. He is generally estimated to be the most influential person in the history of the blues and the jazz. During his time he published more than 1500 gramophone records. Most of them became classics. He had a particular gift for renewal, without changing his simple style and naturalness, and his performances were always full of joy and inspiration. Armstrong was accused, in his time, of being too obliging to the whites. Later on, his behaviour was judged to be a technique of survival. The fact is that he took some brave actions against segregation in his hometown, New Orleans. Segregation laws were not abandoned in New Orleans until 1965. Long after that, the greatest trumpet player in New Orleans was said to be the white Al Hirt, not Louis Armstrong.<sup>1</sup> All in all, it is difficult to imagine a more likely source of inspiration for Hughes's poem "Trumpet Player" than Louis Armstrong.

When I first read this poem, my immediate impulse was to place it in the blues-and-jazz category. Then I realized that I was being misled by my associations to Armstrong's face and the sound of his trumpet. The theme most definitely is the blues and jazz, and the poem is a declaration of the amount of suffering and deprivation it takes to create such heartrending and beautiful music. The form, though, is of quite a different character. The slightly broken pentameter and the uneven end rhymes add another dimension to the poem. When Hughes employs this old European tradition in his expression, he lifts and broadens the message out of the confinement of the African American community. It makes the reader envision the speaker of the poem as a representative of a far larger audience, a white man indeed, paying homage to the black artist and his art.

The first stanza describes the entire history of the African American's misery. It takes a lot of pondering and many readings to grasp the entire content of this stanza. By a trick of the

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<sup>1</sup> [www.carlpetter.com/texts/armstrong.htm](http://www.carlpetter.com/texts/armstrong.htm)

tense of the word “blaze”, Hughes adds generations of time to his description. If he had used the present tense, it would have pointed directly to the eyes of the trumpet player. That would not have made sense. After all, nobody is whipping him. The phrase “the smoldering memories of slaveships / blazed” takes us back to the time of those who actually remembered the root of the evil, the capturing in their home country and the enslavement in the new world. So, the memories of the slaveships and of former greatness and fall is the link between the first slaves and the generations to follow. When they were beaten and whipped, they were reminded of the wrongdoings their people had suffered, and their minds blazed with anger and resentment. This is the inheritance of the trumpet player. This is the burden he has to bear. In addition to his own humiliations, he has to carry with him those of all his forefathers. He is mentally battered and bruised by it, and this weariness it is that is shown like “moons/beneath his eyes”.

The succession of the stanzas seems a bit out of place. Stanzas number two and four share the same theme, and so do stanzas number three and five. It is not beneficial to the flow of the poem to part them. The obvious reason why Hughes has done this is the connection from stanza three to stanza four, by the repetition of the word “desire”. This repetition is significant in its efficiency to build up to and emphasise the sense of longing in stanza three. So, facing the choice, one would rather sacrifice the continuity than this effect.

As for stanzas two and four, they both deal with the description of this particular human being, who is the result of a process which has been going on for hundreds of years. In stanza two there are two words which immediately stand out as significant, the words “tamed” and “crown”. At first they seem to be unquestionable opposites. The word “tamed” gives associations to a wild animal, “crown” to a human being at the peak of civilization. Indisputably, the two words signify bottom and top, or rather beginning and end, of a line of development. The question here is whether this development qualifies to be called a positive

progress. One could argue that the consequence of civilization has, at all times and in all cultures, meant the proportional degeneration of human ability to survive without it. One can question if it is profitable in the long run to become dependant upon all the wonderful achievements civilization brings. The answer appears to be negative. All civilizations known in the history of mankind follow the same pattern. At first they develop slowly, then more rapidly, and finally they end in destruction.

The fact that the white man's society has forced the black man to slick back his hair in order to conform does not mean that he is diminished. Hughes seems to imply that even after centuries of oppression and persecution, the black man is still in possession of his ancestors' pride. Even when he is forced to change his appearance, he carries the sign of his humiliation as a crown. So, they have not managed to "tame" him. It is only on the surface he has adhered to their ways. He has kept his own values intact, far more precious than those of the whites, Hughes seems to claim. So, the two words do not describe opposites, because actually, there has been no change! The word "tamed" then becomes a mockery of the whites, who think they can break the black man's pride just because they have managed to make him straighten out his "vibrant hair".

On the other hand, Hughes could be referring to what Peter Bruck calls "the cult of the primitive black" that many white took for granted in the 1920s (*BLC* 1060). In that case it is not as if he is praising the human pride of the trumpet player. He is rather lamenting the fact that the black man, the wild spirit, has been caged. This puts him in a pitiful position. He becomes a regrettable object, just as misplaced as a wild animal behind bars. Regardless of point of view, this becomes a discussion of identity. The significance of identity seems to be an underlying theme in much of Hughes's poetry. In this poem, too, identity is a key word, the identity of "the proud black".

The longer I studied Hughes's works and his public statements, the more clearly there appeared a certain ambivalence in his attitude towards black people and black culture. There seems to be a great number of contradictions in his utterances. On the one hand he praises the ebony ancestor as his own, like in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". On the other hand there is his reaction towards his patroness, Charlotte Mason, or "Godmother", who found that he was not exotic enough in his works. He said, after their break up was a fact: "She wanted me to be primitive, to know and feel the intuition of the primitive. Unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythm of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did" (*BLC* 1060). Nevertheless, Hughes is avid in his praise of the primitive, and this is perhaps not a contradiction after all. He almost seems to have a fascination with black history and culture, which is also demonstrated in his urge to be recognised as black. In box 492 of Hughes's personal papers at Yale University in New Haven, I found a folder marked "Notes on a Lecture on Africa/1930 Jan." Here he says: "I look upon Africa as the last sanctuary of the human race, as the last sanctuary of animal life, and the last of human peace. Luckily it has not been touched by the white man, . . . that most destructive of all forces . . . You feel the earth spirit, which is very different from the human spirit."<sup>2</sup> This goes a long way to explain the nature of his attraction. It seems as if the reason may partly be found in his mixed blood. The fact is that it makes him a spectator to the realm of blackness. He is white enough to be attracted to the exoticism of it, and not black enough to belong. The whites too, are drawn to the primitive aspects of the black arts. It thrills them because it is strange and exotic, and perhaps also because it corresponds with something humanly archetypal deep down in their soul, something that materialism has almost managed to cultivate away. At the same time, proud as they are of their splendid civilization which has allowed them to remove themselves from nature, they can despise the same primitivism in the blacks. They have obviously lagged

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<sup>2</sup> The Beneicke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

behind in the struggle of progress, and are positioned on a lower rung of the ladder of evolution.

In order to contradict this view, Hughes seems to attempt a reversal of this fixed order. He appears to claim that the development of western civilization is a decline, not a progress. He, being both black and white is in the position to judge, and by his worship of black culture he certainly makes clear his preference. His appreciation of the blacks goes to the extent that he tries to renounce his white blood. Nevertheless, it is his white blood that pays homage to his lost values. Those values are the primitive, or perhaps archetypal sides of his origin which the white man has lost on his way to material glory. Hughes himself verifies this claim. In a letter to William Dickens, dated Oct. 13, 1931, he expresses concern about his ability to reach his black audience: "In many cases the context, too, of Negro books, has been uninteresting or displeasing to a large part of the race. They have not cared for jazz-poetry or low-down novels – and one can't blame them since they know such things all too well in life" (*BLC* 1057). I think this statement speaks for itself. It both confirms the necessity of being an outsider to appreciate black culture and the artistic display of it, and places Hughes firmly as an outside admirer, however much he wants to identify with the blacks.

Stanza four of "Trumpet Player" could have been written by one of the great romantic poets of the 1800s. Phrases from a poem by Yeats, from his early and thereby romantic production, "The Stolen Child", also springs to mind:

Come away, O human child!  
To the waters and the wild  
With a feary, hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

( *Norton Anthology of English Literature* 2090).

This is what our trumpet player desires. However, he has to make do with the substitutes that civilization has provided him with. He is a true representative of the romantic



idea that man's place is in nature, and that civilization degenerates him and makes him unhappy. The phrase "longing for the moon" has a double impact, since this is an expression we use to describe a situation where the object of the desire is unobtainable. What he gets instead, is a poor compensation for the real thing. On the one hand there is the, at that time, unexplored, mystical part of the infinite universe, with all its connotations of wonder, longing and mysticism. Also it reflects the basic condition of our existence: the sun. On the other hand, there is this small bulb of intense, artificially constructed light, not illuminating half of the planet Earth, but restricted to a small part of the room. In addition to this, it is not merely insufficient. It directly bothers him. Everybody knows what "a spotlight in his eyes" would feel like. In this case it serves as a symbol of civilization's damaging effect on human nature. The image of the bar glass as a replacement for the sea is just as strong. The word "sucker" indicates that the trumpet player is seeking comfort for his misery in the glass, read alcohol. Instead of basking in the freedom and space of nature, he consoles himself with a "pain-killer" which enables him to forget his sorrows for a while.

Stanzas three and five are focused on the music, or rather on the effect it has on the listener. The images employed here are directly related to the speaker's senses. Through them Hughes transfers to the reader a vivid experience of the "taste of honey" and a sensation of "liquid fire" in his blood. The listener is also the recipient of the result of the trumpet player's sufferings through the rhythm. The image he uses to describe the rhythm is not, like the former two, of a physical quality. The "ecstasy/Distilled from old desire" is telling us about the spiritual state of the artist. In this way he includes all sides of a human being, body and soul, in an interaction between the music, the artist who performs it, the listener, and the poet, who is transferring it into beautiful poetry.

In stanza five the trumpet player is promoted to the position of a medium. The music is personified, and becomes an active entity in the process of the performance. The trumpet

player is depicted as a tool, unaware of what is taking place, as the jazz pierces his soul and brings out “a golden note”.

The repetition of the word “lips” throughout the poem is another factor which leads the reader’s associations to Louis Armstrong. He was nicknamed Satchmo, derived from satchel mouth, a phrase very suitable to describe his prominent lips. It is also general knowledge that he suffered from lip cancer for many years. Hughes must have been aware of that, considering the similarity in their life spans. In my opinion, this fact adds to the degree of suffering of the medium who transfers the message of the blues and jazz.

In May 1957, Hughes’s “all-Negro” show *Simply Heavenly* opened at the 85<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse. Although other plays had been performed continually and without incident until then, the Fire Department now got very busy, with almost daily inspections. There was no end to the violations now found, which had not been discovered while the other plays were on:

The steps to the women’s dressing room were declared too narrow. The dressing room was closed, so the women had to costume themselves in the toilet. Then the stairs to the balcony were pronounced too narrow and the balcony had to be closed, thus cutting off a portion of the box revenue. . . . Finally the Fire Department stated that the building, a fraternal lodge hall, should have had (in the years before) a ten thousand gallon water tank on the roof for fire prevention. The astonished owners of the building were ordered to install one forthwith. They thereupon gave up and asked the *Simply Heavenly* company to vacate the premises, since the landlords could not afford so expensive an installation simply to accommodate a new theatrical tenant (*Black Magic* 290).

The play tried to survive on other stages for a while, but in the end it dissolved and was taken off. *Simply Heavenly* went on stage in August 1957. It is an interesting fact that in July the same year Hughes was praised in a musical reading of his poetry, called “A Part of the Blues”. The text on the photograph on a newspaper clipping reads: “Celebrated – The contemporary author Langston Hughes”<sup>3</sup> In my opinion this demonstrates the changes that

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<sup>3</sup> The Beneicke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 571

were taking place in society in this period. 1957 was the year when Congress passed the Civil Rights Bill, a development obviously not welcomed in all camps.

*Simply Heavenly* was an all black show, so evidently the actors in that case were all in it together, but it is generally agreed that among the performers there was very little prejudice and intolerance. Hughes claims: “Artists had their own civil right bills in their hearts long before Washington began to make laws about it” (*Black Magic* 282). Their solidarity was evident from the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Actors Equity Association was formed in 1913. This association made a great contribution to the struggle toward democratization of every area which effected artists, from the stage to the treatment and security when they were touring. The last page of this chapter in *Black Magic* is a description of the acts of solidarity the association performed in order to obtain equal rights for blacks and whites. The strength of the commitment of the members is exemplified in the boycott of the National Theatre in Washington. Hughes tells us: “The 54-year-old Equity, (in 1967), with about 12,000 members, resolved in 1947 that no actors belonging to the Association should perform in the National Theatre in Washington after May 31, unless its policy of not admitting Negroes were dropped. At that time no legitimate theatres in Washington admitted colored spectators. . . . It was Ingrid Bergman, Swedish star of stage and films, who brought the Jim Crow theatre situation in Washington to a head” (*Black Magic* 288). After an incident where black veteran soldiers were turned away at the door of the theatre, Miss Bergman together with the all-white cast scheduled to play at the theatre the following week, petitioned Actor’s Equity to issue a ruling forbidding its members to participate in future productions in Washington theatres (*Black Magic* 289).

It is not likely that Hughes’s choice of examples is accidental. Great names have great impact in all areas, and in collecting such outstanding artists as Bessie Smith as victim and Ingrid Bergman as sympathizer, Hughes makes his point very clearly. To my mind *Black*

*Magic* is a severe attack on segregation, and a huge contribution to the black's cause. Poetry does not have a large audience, while factual prose gets through to everybody. However, history reading can be extremely boring if it is reduced to the reeling off of dry facts. Not so this book. I join my voice with Ossie Davis's in the foreword: "*Black Magic* is not only about art, it is itself a prime example of that art in action...the storyteller's art: Langston chuckling to himself at what he found – like Brer Rabbit with a pencil – sniffing out, hunting it down, digging it up, putting it away; chuckling over the living history of a people, keeping it in the back of his mind all those many years, then finally setting it down in this book" (*Black Magic* foreword). Also, Hughes's involvement in the artists' problems, and his excitement – Davis calls it his wonder – at the artists' great achievements, is continually giving colour and spice to the texts. The careful cataloguing of the artists' performances, on stage and off, together with the delightfully selected pictures, bring the artists to life and stir the reader's sympathy and, if he is white, his feeling of shame about the past. In 1967 it must have been a firebrand, a firebrand of comfort to the blacks and of enlightenment to the whites. It is also a testimony to the fact that Hughes never tired of his task. The examples in this chapter, from "The Weary Blues" in 1926, via his article in the *Chicago Defender* in 1956, to *Black Magic*, his very last work, in 1967, establish that his engagement endured throughout his life.

## Chapter II

### *Proletarians Unite: The Financial and Working Conditions of the Blacks*

The bees work  
Their work is taken from them  
We are like the bees –  
But it won't last  
Forever. (CP 172).

In a chapter about the employment and the economic conditions of African Americans it seems inevitable to start where it all began, with slavery. Americans disagree on the origin of chattel slavery in the first British colonies. Some assert that the free blacks enjoyed the same terms as the black bondsmen for decades long before slavery was instituted. Others hold the opinion that slavery began as early as in 1619, a year before the Mayflower landed the Pilgrim Fathers on American soil. In a letter to Sir Edwin Sandys, John Rolfe reported that “in late August, 1619, a Dutch vessel had arrived at Point Comfort ‘with not anything but 20 and odd Negroes, which the Governor and Cape Marchant bought for victualle’”(Black Americans 66). However, misunderstandings may have occurred, because the reporters at the time failed to distinguish between the buying of a service and a person's body. They make the conclusion that in 1619 “neither Negroes nor English bondservants were owned as chattels in Virginia”(Black Americans 66). The first official distinction was made by an act of the Virginia Assembly in 1639, which stated “that ‘all persons except Negroes should be armed’”. This was the first of a long train of statutory discriminations that would ultimately make of the Negro a slave” (Black Americans 67). The next stage of the progress was life servitude. In the 1640s and 1650s it is certain that some blacks served for life and others did not. In 1660 two acts of the Virginia Assembly make it apparent that they were favourable towards the practice, and also inclined to encourage increased importation of blacks. The reason for this

was obviously that black labour grew rapidly more important to the tobacco planters in Virginia.

The final stage in the process of enslavement was the question of who should own the children of a “life-servant”. Pondering this, one realizes how desperately important it was to all parties. If the children were to follow the course of nature and automatically belong to their parents, that would mean that each new generation was born free. It would also provide the blacks with some degree of power and better their status. You cannot be a totally subdued individual if you parent free children. Freeborn children would also mean hope for the future. This was not in the interest of the slave masters, and consequently steps were taken to prevent it. Another important issue in the matter was the miscegenation. A sexual relationship between a white woman and a black slave was almost unheard of. On the other hand, it is an established fact that white men took black women as their mistresses, or simply used them as they pleased. What, then, would be the status of the child of such an alliance? The problem was settled by the Virginia Assembly in December 1662, as they declared: “‘Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any English man upon a Negro woman shall be slave or free, *Be it enacted*. . . that all children born in this country shall be bond or free only according to the condition of the mother’. By this legislation lifelong servitude was made self perpetuating; the children of slaves being property in the same manner as the natural increase of ‘life stock or other chattels’” (*Black Americans* 69).

The working conditions of the slaves were extreme in every manner. They were deprived of the natural opportunity to profit from their ability to work, because their work power was not theirs to sell. It belonged to their masters. An even worse consequence of the slaves’ position was that they also lost the power to decide what was going to happen to their body. It, too, was their masters’ possession. Many would hold the opinion that the ultimate degradation to a human being is to lose control over the most private and precious part of

one's person, one's sexual life. This was the position of the slaves. They were there to use and abuse as the mood took their master. The tragic result of some of those relationships is the theme of Hughes's poem "Mulatto". It appeared first in the *Saturday Review of Literature* on January 29 1927, and is part of the volume *Fine Clothes to the Jew*:

I am your son, white man!  
...  
A little yellow  
Bastard boy. (*CP* 100).

These are the first and the two last lines of "Mulatto", and they give a full explanation of the conflict. The mulatto's position was in fact even more difficult than the black's. Being neither black nor white, they did not truly belong in either camp. They were rejected by the black people because they were partly white, and by the white people because they were partly black. The speaker in Hughes's poem is in the worst thinkable position. He is even rejected by his own family, or at least part of it. Hughes is obviously not referring to contemporary conditions. This is a reminder of the maltreatment of the African Americans in the past.

"Mulatto" has the shape of a performance, a kind of call and response between the white father and his illegitimate son, and between the illegitimate and his white brother. This dialogue is overlying a symbolic description of the environment in which the action is taking place. The first call in the first line, "I am your son, white man", is an accusation and an appeal at the same time. He is accusing his father of bringing about his miserable position, and appealing to him to better it. The setting is "The Deep South", where segregation and exploitation of the blacks were the most severe. The mood of the poem is created by the description of the surroundings where the son was conceived: "Georgia dusk . . . the moon

over turpentine woods . . . the sent of pinewoods . . . the Southern night is full of stars". This is where the shameful act was performed: "One of the pillars of the temple fell".

The temple is the social structure, and it has been disturbed by white having sex with black. Hughes is obviously ironic here, suggesting that the white man is committing sacrilege by degrading himself with a black woman. The outcome of this "despicable" union is the little yellow boy, the little yellow star. This little yellow star is not alone, though. The Southern night is full of them, a fact which indicates strength in numbers and a warning of danger. The image of the star also brings associations to the Jews, who have been persecuted throughout history. Even to indicate such a similarity is a strong accusation towards a society which is founded on the idea of liberty and equality. At the same time, the symbol of the star tells us that he is a splendid thing, this little yellow boy. In this way, he uses the same symbol to elevate the worth of the mulatto, and remind his readers of how merciless society can be. The response to the speaker's call is given in the same blunt manner: "You are my son!/ Like hell!" The finality in the rejection is emphasized by the use of an exclamation mark instead of a question mark after "son". The claim thereby is treated as an absurdity, and a flat denial is the only response it deserves. Both the call and the response illustrate a cold, hard, matter of fact every day life. This serves to emphasize the poet's description of the warm, sensual, and heavily scented nights. Hughes gives us the perfect surroundings for love and passion. Then he adds abuse and contempt to one part of the couple, and pain and humiliation to the other. The plural of "the bodies of nigger wenches", and the position "against black fences", depicts a scene of one-sided, loveless lust. In this manner the gravity of the misdeed stands out even more clearly.

At my first reading of the poem I was a bit displeased with the sentence "what is a body but a toy", without being able to pinpoint what was wrong with it. When I learned from the footnote of *Collected Poems* that it had not appeared either in the earlier version in the



*Saturday Review of Literature* or in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, I took a closer look. This time the effect was clear. By using the expression “a body” without painting it black to the reader, Hughes is generalizing, and thereby draws the concentration away from his theme, the abuse of black women. The speaker, the abuser this time, could even have been talking about his own body as a toy to bring him pleasure. The fact that it is repeated only increases the damaging effect. It seems all the more surplus since Hughes later on in the poem hits his target precisely with an almost similar sentence: “What’s the body of your mother?” Then the poet goes on to give us a summary of what this is all about in four lines of mockingly cheerful rhythm and rhyme:

A nigger night  
A nigger joy  
A little yellow  
Bastard boy.

This is nothing to take at all seriously. Both the action of the white man, and the result of it, can be dismissed with a shrug of the shoulders. The fact that he is condemning his own flesh and blood to a life in misery is not admitted, or perhaps not even considered.

The third voice in the “call and response” dialogue is the white brother. Here Hughes comments on the perhaps most appalling condition of the mixed children of the earliest times: the presence of their white siblings. Let us picture a plantation in the Deep South, and assume the theme of “Mulatto” to be dealing with conditions before the Civil War. At that time the working conditions and the economic status of the “son” would have been at bottom pitch. If he was a field hand his life would consist of sweat and toil and no prospect whatsoever to better his position. His working conditions presented an insurmountable hindrance. He would hardly get a glimpse of his white brothers and sisters. His complexion would give away his origin, though, and probably cause him trouble even among his black family members. However, “the son” would be in an even more appalling position if he was among those who were picked to serve in the house or in the stables. There, although half of him was a product

of his white father's genes with all which that implies, he would be obliged to serve his siblings as a mere slave. Watching their often luxurious life, he would have to bow and adjust to their moods. The effect of such a position on a person's psyche is inconceivable to us.

Hughes tells us what he is going to experience, if he dares to suggest kinship:

Naw, you ain't my brother  
Niggers ain't my brother  
Not ever  
Niggers ain't my brother

The fact that this was accepted behaviour in a society which proclaimed equality for all its members seems like a demonstration of the human potential for hypocrisy and self indulgence. The ironic witticism that "all men are created equal but some are more equal than others" appears to be an appropriate description of reality. However, even if the mulatto in the poem is told to: "git on back there in the night / you ain't white", Hughes gives him the last word. The poem ends with a demand: "I am your son, white man!/A little yellow/Bastard boy."

In his *Symbolizing America in Langston Hughes's "Father and Son"*, Dolan Hubbard discusses Hughes's views on the mulatto and the culture of race in "Father and Son". As an introduction to the essay he gives an account of how Hughes's great-grandfather, a white man fell in love with one of his slave-girls, freed her, married her, and acknowledged the four children she bore him. As a consequence, the whole family was ostracized. Although their marriage was technically illegal, they were buried side by side like man and wife on the farm. Hubbard deduces that Hughes's fascination with the mulatto and the treatment of his characters are dictated by his ancestors. This seems quite logical. Not only was his great-grandfather, Ralph Quarles, a pioneer in his own way, both his grandfather, Charles Langston, and his uncle, John Mercer Langston, were distinguished educators and politicians. Hubbard maintains that being a descendant of one of the more prominent black families in the

nineteenth century America had the consequence that he “continually explored his dual ancestry” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 314).

While “Mulatto” has a general appeal and could be situated within a time span of more than a century, the short story “Father and Son” is placed in the 1930s. It thereby points its critical finger directly to the authorities of that period. The setting is the Norwood plantation in South Georgia with all the classical ingredients: the Big House, the worker’s quarters, and the blacks, singing as they toil. This appears to be conditions very much the same as a hundred years ago. However, there have been changes, and at first glance they appear to be major. The workers are no longer slaves. They are free to leave whenever they choose. Surely, this represents a revolution in American society. Perhaps even more revolutionary is the fact that the patriarch up in the Big House is actually providing for his mixed children. He even sends them to college. A slight scratch on the surface, though, reveals the fact that the alterations are superficial. The field workers, however free they may be on paper, are working just as hard. These are the 1930s, and with the depression at hand the fighting for jobs would plunge wages to ground level. To be able to eat you had to struggle to find a job and then stick to it for dear life. So much for freedom. Whereas Norwood’s behaviour to his mulatto children is concerned, it works smoothly as long as it is not put to the test. When his son Bert, obviously enlightened by his stay at Atlanta college, claims what he means is his *birthright*, his father refuses to acknowledge him. Hubbard says: “The colonel cannot publicly acknowledge his black children; to do so would be tantamount to undermining the credibility of the system that empowers him, and which has shaped his image of himself” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 315). Hubbard goes on to declare that Hughes in “Father and Son” attacks the romantic view of the South. He demands that the Civil War was not fought for a noble and just cause, and it is time to stop worshipping the heroes from that conflict. He points out that the South is existing upon “an outdated economic system, one that no longer can sustain itself,” and

conveys Hughes's message to be that: "The apologists for this ideology do not acknowledge the violence that it takes to make the system work for the few while the many suffer in silence" (*CLC* Vol. 108, 315).

So, what Hughes is actually conveying to his audience is that the South is still dependant upon the working force of the poor and oppressed black population. The South was founded on black labour, and has to rely on it for the duration of its culture. Seen from this angle, it becomes clear why the politicians in the South were so desperate to maintain the segregation policy. Black people had to be reminded of their inferiority all the time during their everyday life, even when they were taking a bus ride or visiting a public toilet. That was the only way to avoid a revolt.

Far worse than to be obliged to work too hard, as has been the black's lot so far in this discussion, is the prospect of being deprived of the opportunity to work altogether. "Out of Work" was published in *Poetry* in April 1940, in the aftermath of the Depression. Hughes had some personal experience with the problem of getting a job. After leaving university he had to fend for himself since his father's allowance depended upon his continuing his studies. He started to answer ads for any kind of work he could do, all in vain. He tried for jobs as a bus boy, waiter, handyman, and clerk, but soon realized that unless the notice specified "coloured" there was no use in applying. He later wrote about this period: "Experience was proving my father right. On many sides, the color line barred your way from making a living in America" (Berry 32). After temporary employment on a truck farm on Staten Island, he found himself in a seemingly futile search for a job. He reached the point that he feared that he simply might not get work at all. Berry says: "His Harlem landlady – a strongly maternal, amiable, optimistic Negro woman, named Mrs. Dorsey – could not reconcile him to the situation, but she encouraged him daily not to give up" (Berry 33). This is interesting because, as Berry also says, Mrs. Dorsey inspired him to write "Mother to Son".

A decade later, in 1931, Hughes focused on the financial crisis that was gripping the country. Even though his opinions were rather radical, they were well founded on the disastrously high level of unemployment among African Americans. An “Urban League” study showed that “With a population only a quarter Negro, half the unemployed in Huston were black; in Little Rock, Arkansas, blacks formed twenty percent of the city but more than half of the unemployment, in Memphis, almost twice as many blacks as whites were without a job” (Rampersad 214). On arriving back in the North after his trip to Haiti in 1931, Hughes had in mind to write another novel. This national crisis, however, challenged his social conscience, and he decided to follow Mrs. Bethune’s advice and make a reading tour to the South. His aim was “to create an interest in racial expressions through books, and to do what I can to encourage young talent among our people” (Rampersad 214). In between his return to New York and his departure for the South, Hughes made a marked move to the far left. His change of attitude was so discernible that he was accused of having joined the Communist Party of the United States. This accusation he had to face, and he strongly denied it for the rest of his life (Rampersad 215). Given the no discriminating ideology of communism, Hughes was bound to be attracted by it. Truly, some of his poems from that period are rather “red”, or at least radical. In “Tired” he actually calls for “armed revolution”: “Let us take a knife/and cut the world in two/And see what worms are eating/At the rind” (*Good Morning* 36). In September, 1932, his poem “Good Morning Revolution” was published in *New Masses*:

Good Morning Revolution:  
You’re the very best friend  
I ever had.(*Good Morning* 3).

These opening lines of the poem are obviously a proclamation of a dedication to a cause. “Revolution” is a general expression. However, since the one which took place in the USSR

was the most recent in time in 1932, Socialism or Communism immediately springs to mind. The personification of the revolution adds to the impact of the statement. The definition of a friend is someone who would do almost anything for you and never let you down. By pronouncing the revolution as his best friend, Hughes is indicating that it has already proved its worth. It also commits Hughes to be just as faithful to the revolution as it has proved, and will go on proving, to be to him. If Hughes really had reservations about Communism, as he later claimed, he most certainly does not display it here. Here he seems to kowtow to Communism as a solution to all the problems and injustice of his own society. Given the background, this is quite a natural reaction. As already mentioned, what caught Hughes's attention most prominently during his trip to the USSR was the apparently non-existing race discrimination. He naturally came to give the ideology of that society the credit for such conditions. As it had taken an armed revolution to bring these conditions about, he saw that as a means to change the status of the African Americans as well. In addition to being a challenge to rebel, the poem is, in a subtle way, a protest against segregation. It could be read as an indirect appeal to white workers to show solidarity to black workers.

From the dialect he employs in the poem, I deduce that the speaker is not black. His verbs are almost all in the correct tense. There is only one exception, the "you was" in line nine. If he wanted to depict a black speaker he would have confused the verbs in a more or less deliberate manner. The abbreviations and the ellipsis are also modest. He uses them in "vacationin'" (line 22), and in "hangin'" (line 15), but he writes "everything", (line 35 and 42), "morning" (line 41 and 46), and "greetings" (line 49) correctly. He has double negative in line 29 and 30: "Me I ain't never been warm in winter" / "Me I ain't never known security". However, he is correct in line 17: "And ain't got a damn thing in this world." The rest of the abbreviations and touches of dialect indicates a white man from the working classes. In fact it is even almost too "educated" to be representative of a person from "the floor", the

stereotype of a working man. He certainly does not emerge from the poem as black. In this way, Hughes is ignoring “the colour line”, simply by pretending that it does not exist. A worker is a worker, he seems to assume, whatever complexion he might be. They have to stick together if they are to succeed in their struggle for better conditions. He refuses to recognize the facts of the statistics, the fact that society is divided in three major parts where work is concerned. Instead of facing the reality of the division into bosses, white workers, and black workers, he talks as if there are just “bosses” and “workers”. The workers, the “buddies”, have in their power to “take over” society if they join forces. The suggestion of this union also implies the certainty of equality between black and white. Hughes demands that white workers admit that fact, recognize their opportunity, and act.

I find that in this attempt to uniform his speaker in order to make him a universal representative, Hughes gets his claws clipped. There is no edge to his message. We have heard it all before, and we are tired of it. He even goes as far as to quote Marx’s definition of social power: “All the tools of production” (line 42). Somehow, this is not Langston Hughes. Faith Berry is of a different opinion, though. In the introduction to her collection of Hughes’s long hidden revolutionary poems *Good Morning Revolution*, she demands that: “The works were collected as evidence of some of the best writing ever done by Hughes” (*Good Morning* xiv). Arnold Rampersad does not agree with this. He states that the most prominent of Hughes’s poems, such as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Mother to Son”, could not have been written under the Communist aesthetic. He also claims that Hughes fails in his attempt to combine revolutionary rage with his vocation to fight for the blacks. He calls the result “not a poem, but ideology, tempered and sharpened into slogans” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 296). His opinion is that in this process Hughes’s identity is lost, and he draws the conclusion: “Only Hughes could have written ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’, but given the right mixture of radical rage

and literary adroitness on the part of the writer, “Good Morning Revolution” could have been written by almost anyone” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 296).

From the way he handled this part of his production, one can deduce that Hughes was not quite comfortable with it. Saunders Redding establishes the fact that Hughes refused to read his revolutionary poetry at many occasions when it would have been most appropriate to do so. He leaves to Faith Berry to explain why (*Good Morning* ix, x). She, on her part, refuses to accept that it was because of his acknowledgement of poor quality. The publishers are the ones to blame, she says. At the time, the editors and the critics shared the opinion that this part of Hughes’s production did not fit his popular image. They put it down to “bad influence” at a time when many American writers were moving toward the left in reaction to the rise of Fascism in Europe and the malfunction of Capitalism at home. It was regarded as “an isolated phase of his earlier career” (*Good Morning* xi). It is a fact, though, that some of his most radical works came into being alongside his popular work. On this foundation Berry suggests that: “The phase actually lasted as long as he lived” (*Good Morning* xi). However, in order to be able to make a livelihood out of his writing, he had to oblige to his publishers and keep these works out of the main focus of his audience. In an attempt to remain faithful to his principles he contributed this part of his production to small, insignificant magazines. To let it dominate his image would have cost him too dearly, and perhaps tongue-tied him altogether, Berry seems to imply (*Good Morning* xii). Among Hughes’s diaries and notes from his trip to Russia and China in 1932-33, I found an interesting sheet of typed text. It read:

“Russian friends were always asking how I could be so interested in the workers without belonging to the party. . . . I explained too, that my being a Negro, and 90 % of the Negroes being workers – manual workers – further propelled me to the worker’s cause. But you are an intellectual, they’d say. Well, I would answer, Negro intellectuals are in the same boat as the rest of their people. Roland Hayes sometimes sings in places where he couldn’t buy a ticket to his Own concert if he were outside in the lobby and not on the stage.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Beneicke Rare Book and Manuscript Library



This seems to me to be a proof of his relaxed attitude towards Communism. To him it obviously was just another approach to his original and everlasting goal: better conditions for the black people. It presumably would not have cost him too much agony to renounce his radical works.

In an essay published in 1986, Arnold Rampersad suggests another reason why he did this. He argues that the leftist critics failed Hughes. While his revolutionary poems were too radical to be appreciated by the bourgeoisie press, to the leftists they were not radical enough. He states that Hughes craved the approval of the left from the very start of his career. He was introduced to the movement as early as his Central High School years, between 1916 and 1920. Nevertheless, he had nothing published in the radical press at this early stage of his commitment. Rampersad says: “The point here is that Hughes probably did not try the *Liberator* before he had reached a certain proficiency as a poet. The leftists at the *Liberator*, however, made clear what they thought of his work by rejecting all of it” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 293). The fact is that Hughes had been published for four years and had become some kind of a notability, before a genuinely radical journal accepted any of his works. It is to be found in the Communist *Worker’s Monthly* in March 1925. Rampersad questions the motive for this embrace. He suggests that the *Worker’s Monthly* simply was “getting on the Hughes bandwagon” and concludes: “Established names can be drawn to the leftist journals; for reasons that are probably not hard to understand, the journals themselves often seem incapable of growing their own” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 293). Even if the leftist press did accept his works on and off from then on, they continued to criticize his lack of radicalism. Rampersad tells us that the line “I am afraid of this civilization” in the mouth of a person in one of Hughes’s poems caused the radical poet James Rorty to accuse Hughes himself of being afraid. “The reviewer’s radicalism overwhelms the poet – and often overwhelms poetry

itself”, Rampersad says, “and the last comment is a reprimand. One wonders how, under such harsh conditions, *any* poetry gets written” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 293).

Luckily, the conditions did not put Hughes off writing poetry. Despite repeated rejections, accusations of being of a “petty bourgeois upbringing, and later, an intellectual”, all this placing him “on the outer edge of your class – of the working class”, his pace never slowed (*CLC* Vol. 108, 294). What happened was that he turned more radical every year, perhaps in an effort to please his leftist critics. He obviously wanted very much to be recognized in that camp. Whatever the reason may have been, he came to write some of the most radical pieces of verse ever written by an American, and finally he was appreciated by the leftists. According to Rampersad, when Lydia Filatova wrote an article in *International Literature* about “LANGSTON HUGHES: American Writer” in 1933, he came away, in her final analysis, with flying colors” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 294). How totally dedicated he was to revolutionary ideology is demonstrated by a letter to his friend Prentiss Taylor: “Never must mysticism or beauty be gotten into any religious motive when used as a proletarian weapon” (*CLC* Vol. 10, 295). Furthermore, this statement seems to be a direct reaction to Filatova’s contemptuous condemnation of the religious poems in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*: “The soporific action of religion, with its gospel of non resistance, largely accounts for the difficulty of spreading Communism among the masses of Negro toilers. Hughes in religious ecstasy complains to heaven, sings about white wings of angels, and seeks solace in prayer” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 294). Quite a broadside, which obviously had its effect. After finally being accepted by the left, Hughes found himself rebuked by his former admirers. Blanche Knopf refused to publish his revolutionary poems and Carl Van Vechten predicted that he would grow to be ashamed of them.

Whatever the reason was, the fact is that he did reject this part of his production. Rampersad does not go as far as to claim he was ashamed of these poems, but he does admit

that it is rather “interesting” that he did not include them in his *Collected Poems*. Interesting? It does not seem as if he had much of a choice if he wanted his audience to keep on listening to him. Whether his radical commitment was a phase or not, the poetry from that period did not serve his cause. In retrospect it seems only to have been a delay, and it hampered him in his work for years to come. It would have taken a fanatical Communist to continue on the radical course if he knew it would cost him his reputation as a writer. Although Hughes obviously was intoxicated by Communist ideas at their first encounter, his later behaviour proves that he was nothing of the kind. He willingly enough denounced his Communist past to the McCarthy Committee in 1958. Hughes was first and foremost a black poet, fighting for the rights of the black people, and thereby the black worker. His ambition to integrate black workers and white workers and conform his style to leftist demands at the same time reduces the impact of his message. His voice is drowned in the voices of the masses, too similar to theirs to be distinguished from the crowd. Somehow the black worker gets lost in the multitude of rebellions on the globe. “Good Morning Revolution!” qualifies as an easily read demonstration of this approach, and the failure of it.

After this scrutiny of his, in my opinion, least successful techniques, I will now concentrate on the field in which he is regarded to be the number one, the blues and jazz poems:

I walked de streets till  
De shoes wore off my feet  
I done walked de streets till  
De shoes wore off my feet  
Been lookin’ for a job  
So’s that I could eat. (*CP* 217).

“Out of Work” is a perfect representative of Hughes’s blues poems. The structure of the six-line stanzas, the beat of the syllables, and the plaintive theme makes it a “classic”. It brings to mind Blind Willie Johnson’s penetrating lament, with the simple guitar as the only

accompaniment. Blind Willie Johnson, whose voice is now on its way to outer space aboard the Voyager as “Voice of the Century” on earth, just in case there is somebody out there to listen. This is yet another reminder of how significant the blues form was to Hughes’s success, and how ingenious his choice was. The association to the realm of blues music that automatically struck the reader would multiply the impact of the written word considerably. “Out of Work” is adhering to the most consistent form of the blues. Rampersad tells us about that form: “This is a three-line stanza, in which the second line restates the first, and the third provides a contrasting response to both” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 310). At first glance this seems to disqualify “Out of Work” in the way proclaimed above, considering the number of lines. In reading it through, however, one realizes that even though it consists of six lines, it has only three sentences:

I walked de streets till de shoes wore off my feet.  
I done walked de streets till de shoes wore off my feet.  
Been looking for a job so’s that I could eat.

So far it confirms well to the blues. The last sentence, however, is a little dubious. Rather than a contrasting response, it seems to be a natural and concluding part of the monologue. Nevertheless, it sounds genuine enough, and the language confirms that this is a black person speaking. The first, and most pin-pointing detail, is the omission of the voiced sound of the finite article. “I walked de streets till/de shoes wore of my feet.” (line one, first stanza), and “ So I went to de WPA”, (line one, second stanza). This practice is consistent throughout the poem. It is also a hallmark of the black dialects, and rules out all possibility of the speaker being white. The second suggestion is an error in the tense of the verb, and it appears in the second line of the first stanza. “I done walked” is almost artistic in its determined neglect of grammatical rules. At first glance it is not quite clear what is wrong.

One could, for instance, wish for a “had” in addition to the “done”. That would transfer the sentence to a more common feature of the black dialects, the duplicity of construction both in negation and in statement. After a closer look, though, we realize that our anticipation has lead us astray. All we have to do is swap the “done” with a “have” to make the sentence grammatically correct. However, it must have taken a long line of deduction to replace an auxiliary in the present tense with another in the past tense. It really seems like an artistic innovation, and this kind of alteration in grammar is a characteristic of the African American dialects. Another feature, not so characteristic of the black dialects, though, is the double negative. We find one in line one, stanza two: “ I couldn’t find no job”. The “Lawd” in the first line of the first stanza, and the ellipsis in “lookin’”, ( line three stanza one), and “livin” (line one stanza four) complete the picture.

In an inexplicable manner these alterations seem to represent an enrichment to the expression of the poem rather than a limitation. In his essay from 1989 Arnold Rampersad refers to Ralph Ellison’s word about the language of the blues. Ellison states that it is “a transcendence of those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social justice” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 310). If that is the case, the language is most appropriate in the mouth of the speaker in “Out of Work”. In his book *The Legacy of the Blues*, Samuel Charters asserts that it was “a rich, vital, expressive language that stripped away the misconception that the black society was simply a poor, discouraged version of the white. It was impossible not to hear the differences. No one could listen to the blues without realizing that there were two Americas” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 310).

Hughes has said that “The mood of the Blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung, people laugh” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 310). The reason for this phenomenon is quite obvious in most of Hughes’s blues poems. It is the speaker’s “laughing not to cry” approach to his ordeal which makes the audience respond in this manner. The situation is so bad it

becomes ridiculous. So the speaker is laughing at the madness of it all, and inspires his audience to do the same. “Out of work” displays this technique to the full. It was written in the aftermath of the Depression, and the speaker has worn his shoes off looking for work. The WPA, the Works Projects Administration, a Depression era job program, tells him that he has to stay in town for a year and a day before he can get any kind of employment:

A year and a day, Lawd,  
In this great big lonesome town!  
A year and a day in this  
Great big lonesome town.  
I might starve for a year but  
That extra day will get me down.

The absurdity of this statement, that 365 days would be all right and 366 impossible, suggests the same kind of absurdity as in the WPA’s regulations. In this way the rules are reduced to a laughing matter. Nevertheless, the person in the poem is proclaiming his own destruction, brought about by that extra day. Therefore, in the disguise of an ironic understatement, it becomes a dramatic criticism of society. The extra day seems to be a symbol of the devilish methods the system puts into practice in order to oppress the poor. The little, black man admits that society is going to achieve its aim, but by giving the admission the form of a joke he emerges as the victor. His spirit is capable of mocking his miserable prospect. The impact of the dialect is excellently demonstrated in this poem. It gives the speaker a face and a suffering soul. Through six lines of apparent everyday talk Hughes picks his words carefully and makes the self mocking, ironic humour a strategy to reveal depths of despair.

The ingenious simplicity of “Out of Work” is striking when it is compared to the cliché ridden, bombastic shouting of “Good Morning Revolution”. Here the blues form is presented at its best. Rampersad tells us that this technique was the result of a process which stretched over five years. From 1922 on, Hughes started to engage with the blues in his poetry. First from a distance, then gradually closing in. It was not until 1927, in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* says Rampersad, that he wrote “in the form itself. Thus he acknowledged at last the full

dignity of the people who had invented it” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 311). In 1940, when “Out of Work” came into being, he had had more than a decade to polish his technique. The poem is a testimony to that fact. It also is an appeal to the leaders of society to make an effort to change the statistics of black unemployment.

In 1986 John O. Hodges published an essay in which he discusses the alleged inconsistency in Hughes’s writing. He starts off by pointing to Hughes’s impressive production, both in range and quantity. Then he claims that the very breadth of Hughes’s works would inevitably provoke the same variety in comment from his critics. Thus he explains that some of his contemporaries called him “the poet laureate of the Negro people”, while to others he was “the poet low rate of Harlem”. The most peculiar fact, he adds, is that that kind of contradictory remarks were often made by the same critic at different times. Hodges concludes as follows: “What this reveals, it seems to me, is something about the allusiveness of an individual whose writing often exhibited a surface simplicity that belied its true complexity” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 290). Hodges also puts forward the significance of the turbulent times which coincided with Hughes’s career as a writer. The rapid changes, both in the world in general and in the situation of the African Americans, was the direct reason for the variety in Hughes’s works. Hughes could not allow himself to confirm to one style as a hallmark. What he needed, says Hodges, “was a flexible and dynamic idiom and tone to deal with the many inconsistencies, paradoxes, and wide mood swings in the lives of the people he celebrated in his various writings” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 290).

The poem “Black Workers”, which is quoted at the beginning of this chapter is to be found in Faith Berry’s collection of neglected poems, *Good Morning Revolution* (11). In all its simplicity it represents a third form of poetry Hughes employed to convey his message. It is different from both the blues form and the free verse of his most radical production. In contradiction to “Good Morning Revolution”, it does not shout. There are no quotations to

strengthen its impact, no heavily striking metaphors or artistic twitches of language to strike the reader. All it has in common with “Good Morning Revolution” is the message. Hughes’s only trick in this case is the comparison to the bees. Oddly enough it seems to suffice. The picture of a beehive, swarming with activity comes easily to mind. In addition the bee, like the ant, is renowned for its interminable toil. The image of the product of this toil snapped away from the worthy workers of the hive gives vivid associations to centuries of unjust treatment of black workers.

But it won’t last  
Forever.

It is just a statement of a fact, as if some divine mechanism which could not be stopped was already set in motion. There is no need to shout. The outcome is inevitable. It is only a question of time. The “eloquence” of this short phrase makes it a good example of “the simplicity that belies the true complexity” in many of Hughes’s works. This poem was written in Hughes’s most revolutionary period. All though it obviously is inspired by his Socialist acquaintances, the title states that it is representing the black workers specifically. Spoken in a calm and trustworthy manner, it is an assurance that the present conditions are going to change for the better.

More than two hundred years earlier, similar words were spoken to the blacks. In the year 1800, as mentioned above, Gabriel Prosser also planned an armed revolution to free the slaves. By then it had begun to dawn on the slave owners that the blacks were human beings like themselves, not some kind of a mixture of “a savage and a child”, as Cecil Rhodes once phrased it. As told before, Prosser’s aim was “to make Virginia a black state” (*To Make Our World Anew* 169).

In 1933 the demand for a revolution was stronger and more widespread than ever before in history. The mere mentioning of workers and worker’s rights was in 1933 synonymous with Communism. This is probably the reason why “Black Workers” was found



among Hughes's unpublished works. As already mentioned above, his Communist sympathies caused him a lot of trouble. On his reading tours he was often met with hostile demonstrations, and he was ostracized by certain parts of society. All though this poem gives associations all the way back to the days of slavery, long before any such thing as Communism was preached, Hughes presumably found it safest to keep it from the scrutiny of his critics. In addition comes the fact that if one removes the title the poem becomes universal and all the more threatening to the bourgeoisie. Being forced to abandon a substantial portion of his production meant a tangible setback in Hughes's career. As the role of the black people has been the worker's role all the way along, it must have hampered Hughes considerably to be forced to "watch his tongue" on this subject. The concealment of such a low voiced and seemingly innocent poem as "Black Worker" is a testimony to that condition.

The last poem to be discussed in this chapter, "Negro Servant", carried no dangerous political message (*CP* 131). Its theme was well known and need not be hidden from the eyes of the ruling classes. The setting, in Harlem, restricts the theme to the "black problem". The worker this time is depicted as the perpetual servant, whose only purpose has been to make the living easier for the whites, ever since the slave days of his ancient forefathers. This has nothing to do with Communism, so there would be no harm done to anybody in publishing it. The poem could easily be read as a description of Hughes's own existence in the early twenties. From his own pen we have learned that he was enchanted by Harlem from the very first he set foot there, shortly after he had quit university. We also know how he searched in vain for a decent job. In the end he had to make do with the humblest positions as a delivery boy and a servant to white people. Indeed, he would know what it felt like to be a "Negro Servant".

The opening lines depicts him in this role "subdued, polite/Kind, thoughtful to the faces that are white". Then, to counterbalance this humiliation, he has to go all the way back to his

African origin, to the times before the whites made his ancestors into slaves. Once again, as in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, he finds his pride in the past, in Africa. He refers directly to the drums and the tribal dances of those times. He even includes the “veldt”, which is the name of the plains in South Africa. He leaves no doubt to where his heart is longing to be. It is a yearning for the freedom and the sense of dignity and power associated with the Africa of old times. He cannot have that, but he has found its substitute in Harlem: “Dark Harlem waits for you”. There he finds the “drums of life” in the blues, which is a direct link to the past, derived from the ancient African rhythm: “Oh, dreams, Oh, songs, Oh, saxophones at night!” There he can live out his longings among his kindred spirits, his equals. “Oh, sweet relief from faces that are white!”

The first impression of this poem is that it serves as a heartfelt eulogy to Harlem. After a closer look, however, I seem to observe a hidden rebellion. It is to be found in the style of the poem. When I first read it through I found it somehow annoying. Usually, a stop, a change of lines, or the length of a line are instruments to emphasize the poet’s message. “Negro Servant” did not function like that. The meter was all in a muddle, and the rhyme was haphazardly used to the extent that the poem would have been better off without it. The poem was neither free verse, nor did it have a set meter. Then it slowly dawned on me what Hughes had done. I rearranged the lines, and found that with only small adjustments it fell into an almost perfect iambic pentameter:

All day subdued, polite,  
Kind, thoughtful to the faces that are white.  
Oh, tribal dance!  
Oh, drums!  
Oh, veldt at night!

Kind thoughtful to the faces that are white  
Oh, tribal dance! Oh, drums! Oh, veldt at night!

The most significant changes had to be made in this verse:

At six o’clock, or seven, or eight,

You're through.  
You've worked all day.  
Dark Harlem waits for you.  
The bus, the sub,  
Pay-nights a taxi  
Through the park.  
Oh, drums of life in Harlem after dark!

At six o'clock, or sev'n or eight you're through  
You've worked all day. Dark Harlem waits for you.  
The bus, ( ) Pay-nights a taxi through the park.  
Oh, drums of life in Harlem after dark!

By an ellipsis in "seven" in the first line, and leaving out "the sub" in the third line, it fits.

O, dreams! Oh, songs! Oh, saxophones at night!  
Oh, sweet relief from faces that are white!

This is what I think could be a demonstration from Hughes. He had written the poem in iambic pentameter, which is the most traditional European foot there is. Then he had ripped it up and used it to expose the gap and discrepancies between the two cultures.

Although subtly presented, to me it seems a severe attack. The question whether it was appropriate for the black writers to adapt to the traditions of the Old World was hotly debated in the 1920s. One of those who were considered to be the most dedicated to the conservatism of form was Claude McKay. In an essay from 1986 Rampersad tells us that "As a poet McKay was absolutely ensnared by the sonnet, which – for all the variety possible within its lines – is perhaps the most telling sign of conservatism in writing of poetry in English" (*CLC* Vol. 108. 307).

McKay obviously saw nothing untoward in attacking "the White Fiends" in their own style. Another conservative was Countee Cullen. His idol was John Keats. He passionately wanted African Americans to embrace the traditions of the Old World and adhere to them. In contradiction to Hughes's insistence on being black, even if he was not, Cullen felt his complexion to be an obstacle to him as an artist. He expressed his regrets in his probably most

famous couplet: “ this curious thing/To make a poet black and bid him sing” (*CLC* Vol. 108, 307).

Hughes in his turn, as we all know, engaged himself in the enterprise of making a brand new form, and make it as black and far from the European tradition as possible. Although that particular form eventually became his trademark, that does not mean he left out all other methods. His literary output shows an abundance of variety, naturally more or less successful. Whether “Negro Servant” is a sample of the first or the latter of the two may be left to personal opinion. To my mind it functions better when it is laid out in couplets, in the old European traditional style. It conveys the smells, the sounds, and the atmosphere of “Dark Harlem” with both lucid elegance and convincing intensity. It thereby gives the humble servant a background of interesting exoticism, which elevates him and adds to his dignity.

## Chapter III

### *Separate as the Fingers, United as the Hand: Segregation and Education*

The significance of education in the building of societies can hardly be overestimated. As the definition of education is “the opportunity to learn from other people’s experiences” it must be recognized as the foundation of all progress. Without it, every human being would have to start from scratch. Since we are born with only one instinct, to suck our nourishment, the consequences of such conditions would have been lethal. The human race as it appears at present would face immediate extinction without daily tutoring of its offspring from the very beginning of life. Except for a few basic “tricks” that we need to survive, and which are given to every human being, education has always been a means to establish the hierarchy of the society. Some of the subjects were shown how to labour with the earth, others were educated to become leaders. Consequently, education lead to control, over other people’s lives as well as one’s own. The right to rule in a society more often than not was inherited rather than granted by the subjects as a well-earned position. This fact in time inevitably produced more bad leaders than able ones. An elected leader would have proved his ability to hold his position before he entered it, and could therefore be assumed to rule with justice and wisdom. A person who found himself in a ruling position by the chance of birth might not be quite up to the task. If not, he would have to hide his shortcomings. One way of keeping the crowds under control is to keep them ignorant. Knowledge is power, and power in the lower classes has always constituted a threat to the privileged ones. Langston Hughes gives an example of that in “Father and Son”. As told in my chapter 2, the illegitimate son comes home from his studies at Atlanta University and claims his birthright from his father. This direct link between education and rebellion against unjust conditions has been a theme with Hughes from his

earliest years as a poet. He was convinced that equal education for black and white Americans was one of the essentials in the struggle for equality. The segregation of the educational system in the South seems to have been a challenge to him from his first encounter with it during his reading tours. He was merciless in his condemnation of some of the black principals' humble attitude towards the white authorities.

Keeping his ancestry in mind, Hughes's preoccupation with the educational system seems inevitable. His mother's family was one of the most well-educated African Americans in the nineteenth century, and that would obviously have formed Hughes's attitude in this field. To him education must have seemed like a matter of course. His own first experience with segregation in the schools occurred when he was six. His mother at that time worked as a stenographer in Topeka, and Hughes had difficulties in being admitted to a white school there. His recollection of the incident was that "my mother, who was always ready to do battle for the rights of a free people, went directly to the school board, and got me into the Harrison Street School" (Berry 4). He was almost the only black pupil, and it does not require much imagination to realize the impact such surroundings would have on an impressionable six-year old. Berry confirms this notion: "Through his experiences at the Harrison Street School, he learned not only that he was a child without parents, but also that, unlike those around him, he was black" (Berry 5). The effect of these early experiences is evident in his conduct later in life. His obvious pleasure in provoking authorities on all levels shows that, rather than intimidating him, they inspired his vocation to fight for the rights of the blacks. Perhaps the most provoking poem of them all is "Christ in Alabama". It came into being from a confrontation with the segregation system at a university in the South:

Christ in Alabama.

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Christ is a nigger  
Beaten and black  
Oh, bare your back!

Mary is his mother  
Mammy of the South  
Silence your mouth.

God is his father  
White master above  
Grant him your love.

Most holy bastard  
Of the bleeding Mouth  
Nigger Christ  
On the cross  
Of the South. (*CP* 143).

The theme of this poem, and one could claim, a justification for its cruel message, is the bible verse: “And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me” ( St. Matthew, 25.40). The first two lines of the first stanza is a direct demand to that effect. The “Nigger” is one of Christ’s smallest, so by beating him they also beat Christ. The alliteration in “Beaten and black” has an astounding impact on the associations of the reader. It seems as if it is not only the initial letters which correspond. The two words appear in a disturbing manner to belong together. In a peculiar way they seem to be related, although there is nothing neither orthographic nor semantic to link them. After some pondering, though, one realizes that there is! Just like “old and tired”, and “young and gay”, “beaten and black” are connected through endless repetitions of cruel events in which the blacks have been beaten by the whites. From the childhood bedside reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* onwards, the image of

the maltreated black man has followed us until this very day. Over the years the beating of the blacks, both mentally and physically, has become a familiar image, so familiar that the words seem naturally connected. In the poem they point directly to a spiritual beating of Hughes himself.

In 1931 he was admitted to do a reading of his poetry at a white college. This was surely an extraordinary event at that time, even if the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill was probably the most progressive white university in the South. Looking back on the history of educational segregation, we realize that any real break through in this field was still more than twenty years in the future. Thus Langston Hughes once again positioned himself in the vanguard. His courage and his pleasure in being provocative is displayed through his behaviour during that stay. Although he was admitted to read his poems at the university, he found that none of the (white) teachers or leaders offered to put him up for the night. He eventually found quarters with two female students (suggested by Rampersad to be “the total membership of the local John Reed Club”) (Rampersad 224). Provoked by this humiliating treatment, and on request from the editors of the progressive magazine *Contempo*, Hughes responded with “Christ in Alabama”. It produced an uproar at the university, and he barely escaped a mob.

The recipient of the message in the poem is unquestionably the white Americans. After the accusation of this hideous crime in the first two lines comes something in between a warning and a threat: “Oh, bare your back!” “Prepare for the punishment for centuries of cruel and unchristian behaviour!”, Hughes seems to shout from the mountain. Once again an image springs to mind, an image of millions of blacks being flogged by the supreme master, white and Christian and in his own right to rule the “savage”. “Mistake”, Hughes seems to say, “big mistake!” You were not beating a savage, a half animal. You were beating the very centre of your existence, the highest in your hierarchy, not the lowest. You were beating your



saviour, who had freed you from eternal condemnation, Christ himself. “Oh, bare your backs!” The “Oh” and the exclamation mark give the line a biblical quality and thereby emphasizes the inevitability of it. Punishment has to come, because the Almighty himself will see to it that justice prevails in the end.

The second stanza is a praise to black women. The image of her as the Virgin Mary, mother of all, corresponds directly with the black “Mammy of the South”, also a “mother of all”. It is one of history’s great paradoxes that although the white masters regarded the blacks as some sort of inferior creatures, they still trusted them with the care of their children from birth. From all that has been written about the master/slave period emerges the assertion that the bonds between mammy and child were often stronger than between mother and child. Since the mammy obviously was able not only to substitute for the mother but actually do her job better, one would assume that respect for the mammy would follow naturally. That is not what Hughes conveys in the poem. “Silence your mouth”, he says. Hold your tongue in reverence of the black woman.

The third stanza speaks on behalf of the mulatto, and it contains the same theme as Hughes’s poem of that title discussed in Chapter II. The most prominent sting of this verse is the reference to “the white master” as God. This is pinpointing the white master of the big house, accusing him of having a godlike perception of himself. It also repeats the fact that if so, then his son is half god and should be treated like one. Hughes is ironic here. What he is actually saying is: “Face facts and behave like a human being. The black man and the mixed one are equal with the white. Grant him your love! Accept the bastard!”

In the last stanza he includes both the “nigger” in the first and the “bastard” in the third stanza. They are still both presented as representatives of Christ on earth: “Most holy bastard”, “Nigger Christ”. This time the whites are not merely accused of beating the blacks. Now Hughes goes all the way and draws a direct parallel between the crucifixion of Jesus

Christ and the practice of the Ku Klux Klan, “The cross/Of the South”. Acknowledging the fact that the Klan not only used the cross as their emblem, but also donned the robes of ancient Christian societies, the impact of the accusation becomes grave. Here we have these sworn Christian men, out beating and killing Christ himself in Christ’s own holy name.

The reaction to the publishing of the poem were thunderous. Rampersad tells us: “The powerful *Textile Bulletin* denounced ‘the insulting and blasphemous articles of the Negro Langston Hughes’. Three hundred persons signed a protest to the state against ‘the angel of darkness’. . . ‘It is bad enough to call Christ a bastard,’ a local politician fumed about “Christ in Alabama”, ‘but to call him a nigger, that’s too much!’” (Rampersad 225). The records show that Hughes was not in the least discouraged by these events. On the contrary, he moved like a man possessed, Rampersad says, and he assured Walter White that he had had “a swell time” at Chapel Hill (Rampersad 225, 226). Another proof that Hughes was pleased with the poem and its effect is the fact that he had it reprinted in his final book of poems, *The Panther and the Lash* in 1967. In his essay “The Literary Experiments of Langston Hughes”, James A. Emanuel calls it “that passionately brave and artful poem” (*Black Genius* 181).

As he had been a student at several white educational institutions, Hughes was able to recognize the difference in quality between “black” universities and “white” ones. Throughout his reading tour in the South, he was appalled by the cowardice of the leaders in the various universities he visited. He found them backward and servile towards the white government. He said: “In general, many black schools are not trying to make men and women out of their students at all – they are doing their best to produce spineless uncle Toms, uninformed and full of mental and moral evasions” (Rampersad 232). In his introduction to *Negro Songs of Protest* by Lawrence Gillert, he again attacks the cowardice of most educated blacks: “Fear has silenced their mouths. . . . The tossed scrap of American philanthropy has

bribed their leaders. . . . The charity luxury of Fisk, Spelman, Howard, fool and delude their students. . . . The black millions as a mass are still hungry, poor, and beaten”

(Rampersad 232). In 1927 Hughes visited the Tuskegee Institute. Here he was faced with what Rampersad calls a “contradiction between education and leadership” (Rampersad 232). Tuskegee was the wealthiest of the black schools at that time with its 2600 students. The man in charge was the well known Booker T. Washington. To his horror, Hughes found on campus a guest house for “*whites only*”! (Rampersad 232). Perhaps he should have expected something like that. It was general knowledge at the time that Booker T. Washington was not altogether against some form of segregation. His creed was that blacks and whites should be separate as fingers and united as a hand. All though Hughes quite clearly was of a different opinion and despite the segregated guest house, he doubtlessly held Washington in the greatest esteem, as we shall see later on in this chapter.

In Hughes’s personal papers at the Beneicke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, I found another example of the importance Hughes placed on education. In one of his notebooks from his trip to Russia and China in 1932-33, there was this description of a school at Kushai: “1<sup>st</sup> Turkmenian Normal School. 350 students. 38 teachers. Biology – well equipt labororatory,(his error), charts . . . etc. Five white rats, turtles, frogs.” Then follows immaculate data of students’ and teachers’ background.<sup>5</sup> In another notebook in the same folder he praises the progress in the educational system after the revolution: “Before Revolution only 200 Turk. Now 75,000 pupils. How did they develop 4,300 native teachers in 13 years? “(Box 492). This seems to have been written in admiration of the system which had both the wisdom to recognize the importance of education and the ability to bring results in that field.

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<sup>5</sup> The Beneicke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 492

In his article “Fair Play in Dixie” in the *Chicago Defender* of March 17, 1945, Hughes aims his attack on “the Southern majority in our country” (80). The article is one of many examples of Hughes’s ability to vary his tactics. Only a year previously he published “Hold Tight! They’re Crazy White!” in the *Chicago Defender* of March 11 1944. The theme in the two texts seems to be the same, but the styles could hardly be more different. The latter of the two is obviously inspired by the sociologist Franklin Frazer’s *The Pathology of Race Prejudice*. Hughes is quoting him in his article: “Race prejudice shows precisely the same characteristics as those ascribed to insanity” (*Chicago Defender* 77). With this statement of a professional as foundation, Hughes throws off all caution and gives vent to his seemingly long subdued frustration in an outburst of exaggerated accusations. “Some folks have gone mad from being white,” he says. “Their madness is visible in the fact that they think they are meant to rule the world”. He makes his point very clear, when he puts South Africa with its Apartheid system, Hitler’s Germany, and Dixie in the same category. He claims that “they are mad, wrong in the head, abnormal, and need to be psychoanalysed” (*Chicago Defender* 77). His proof is that “It does not make sense to deny Negroes the vote and than call Negroes bad citizens when they have no chance to be good ones. It does not make sense to deny Negroes equal educational facilities and then accuse them of being ignorant” (*Chicago Defender* 77). This is what is done in Dixie, so he suggests that the Southerners be given help to rid themselves of this “pathological” “domination complex”. He hopes that the Carnegie Fund of the Julius Rosenwald Foundation will find the funds to “psychoanalyse their heads, and help to straighten them out a bit.” He is concerned: “They need help to get back to their right minds, because they are dangerous” (*Chicago Defender* 78). It is not very likely that this belligerent outburst served Hughes’s purpose. Such wild accusations, without any connection to reality, could only alienate and separate the parties in the race conflict. It could also hamper Hughes in his future attempts to be taken seriously.

In “Fair Play in Dixie” he goes to the opposite extreme. From wild exaggerations he switches to deliberate understatements. This he contrives by adapting to the forms of the legendary gentleman of the South. It gives associations to social conditions where honour was more precious than life, and a man’s word was enough to close any deal. His opening lines confirm this first impression, and set the moral standard of the article: “I regret to say it, but so far as I can see, the Southern majority in our country has no sense of fair play at all” (*Chicago Defender* 80). Quite a change from the angry scream of “Hold Tight!” The contents, however, are very much the same. In the first paragraph he once again points out the paradoxical behaviour of the Southerners when they first deny blacks the right to equal education, and then accuse them of being ignorant. Furthermore, how they claim that blacks are un-cultural and at the same time close the state universities to them, bar them from theatres, and deny them access to public libraries (*Chicago Defender* 80). The effect of this low voiced, modest approach from one gentleman to others of the same quality, reaches its peak in a phrase that deserves to be called “the understatement of the year”. First he reminds his audience of the practice of the Ku Klux Klan, how a gang of forty or more would grab a single black and torture him or even lynch him. Then he claims simply that such behaviour is not fair play, because he was only one and they were so many! By addressing them as if they only need a reminder in order to change their behaviour, he implies that they are gentlemen, not mere savages. In this way he forces his audience to realize the horror of these men’s conduct.

Despite Hughes’s, and all the other fighters for equality’s efforts, this state of affairs was not easily changed. Ten years after this article, in 1955, Judge Tom P. Brady made his speech “Black Monday: Segregation or Amalgamation . . . America has Its Choice” (*Eyes* 83). The Monday he is referring to is the Monday, May 17, 1954. That is the day of the U.S. Supreme Court decision which was going to rock the South in its foundation. To comprehend

the full meaning of this blow, it is necessary to go all the way back to 1868. That year the Fourteenth Amendment was made “to remove all legal distinctions among all persons born or naturalized in the United States” (*Eyes* 67). In 1896 *Plessey v. Ferguson* established the “separate but equal doctrine”. The next significant trial in history was the *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954, where the Supreme Court reversed the “separate but equal doctrine” in its decision on Brady’s “Black Monday”. The decision stated that “a classification based solely on race violated the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution” (*Eyes* 62). In his speech, which is a passionate defence of segregation policy, Brady uses exactly the same arguments that Hughes attacks in the two articles above. Brady’s main argument is that the blacks had never proved their right to be treated as equal Americans. One quotation could represent the essence of his speech. After referring to the history of America, the conquering of the West, the Indian wars, the liberation of Texas, Custer, and El Alamo, all events which took place when the blacks were still slaves, he roars: “In the struggle for development, in the expansion and growth which was taking place, in the laying of the solid foundation of our nation, it is ridiculous to assume that the American Negro played any part except as a body servant or a hostler” (*Eyes* 85). As if the “American Negro” had the opportunity.

However contradictory this appeal was, it had its effect. Massive resistance against racial integration brought quick results. In 1955, the year after the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, the *Brown II* decision was made. It asked African Americans to “defer the exercise of a constitutional right, and gave southern states time to hold fast to the practice and doctrine of segregation” (*Eyes* 62). However, at this point in history it was plain that it was only a question of time before desegregation would be put into practice. The diehard Council Right Southerners would have to give in at some point, even if they would fight progress at every step. The Civil Rights movement was still in the making, but its accelerating effect spread like a forest fire.

This also seems to be Hughes's opinion in "The Dilemma of the Negro Teacher Facing Desegregation", printed in the *Chicago Defender* in October 1955. He ignores the *Brown II* decision and acts as if the pupils' rights are confirmed, as they truly were, if only on paper. His concern in this text is the black teachers and their possible difficulties in getting integrated. He says: "As citizens, they should have the right to teach in ANY school, just as our children now have Supreme Court approval to enter any school" (*Chicago Defender* 38). This article is the third example of Hughes's different styles in factual prose. It has no irony, no exaggerations, and no understatements. It is held in a matter of fact tone, and as well as anticipating forthcoming problems, he suggests how they can be solved. Most of the text is neutral to the extent that it could have been written by an outsider. There is one very subjective side to it, though, and that part of the article is not just strongly opinionated, it also marks an alteration from Hughes's general view on the question of equality between the races.

The black-white question regarded from a broad perspective can be seen from three possible points of view. Tom Brady and his like represent one side, namely that the blacks are inferior to the whites. In his "Black Monday" speech he leaves no doubt about his heartfelt conviction. He even claims to have the proof of it, as shown above. At the other extreme we find W.E.B. du Bois, who obviously regarded the blacks as superior to the whites. From some of his statements it seems as if he would like to keep the blacks separated from the whites in order to maintain this superiority. His call to blacks is to "weld together" and show how great a contribution the "black genius" could bring to the world, "the great message we have for humanity" (*Eyes* 8). Hughes, although he was a great admirer of du Bois, does not seem to go to such lengths. His works seem to aim at approval from the white part of society. By depicting the beauty in the black arts and the proud history of the blacks, he wants

acknowledgement of the equality between the races. He does not approve of superiority in any of the parts.

In this article, however, he is promoting the quality of the black teachers as superior to the white ones. He claims that a blacks teacher “has community standing and influence beyond that enjoyed by most whites.” He is also of the opinion that “a white grammar school teacher is just another teacher” in the eyes of society”( *Chicago Defender* 38). To prove the validity of his argument, he points to some of the most prominent persons among the African Americans. Booker T. Washington, Mary McLeod Bethune, and James Weldon Johnson, all of them among the greatest names in African American life, and all of them teachers ( *Chicago Defender* 38). His concern at this point is whether this valuable work force will be maintained, that is, if they will be integrated. He articulates his misgivings about the fact that some all-black educational institutions were facing the possibility of being closed. His solution to the problem must have seemed a little high-flying fifty years ago. Considering the circumstances at the time, his matter of fact suggestion seem naïve and provoking at the same time. Once again he speaks as if a full consent existed between the white and the black population. He proposes to turn all the all-black institutions into all-American institutions, but with special curricula such as African history, in order to enlighten the whites. In addition to this he suggests that some of them could “become centres of interracial culture and social engineering designed towards the building of a better America, with particular emphasis on race relations” ( *Chicago Defender* 39). To sum it all up, the article seems to convey an impossible dream dressed in a realistic garment in an effort to influence society. Once again Hughes is to be found in the vanguard, anticipating the future, and acting as if it already represents the present.

The present, however, was significantly more complicated. Hughes’s article



“Concerning a great Mississippi writer”, printed in the *Chicago Defender* on May 26 1956, is a testimony to that fact. It was a direct reply to an utterance given by William Faulkner, one of the greatest American authors. It was given in an interview which Russell Warren Howe conducted in connection with certain riots at the University of Alabama when an African American girl was given admission to the university. Faulkner’s comment on that event was: “As long as there’s a middle road, all right, I’ll be on it. But if it came to fighting, I’d fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out in the streets and shooting Negroes” (*Chicago Defender* 247).

In the opening line of his article, Hughes wonders whether Faulkner is going to be punished for this statement. Then he elaborates the question by comparing Faulkner to Paul Robeson, the world famous black singer, who lost his passport for “allegedly saying something not nearly so ‘subversified’” (*Chicago Defender* 91). Now Hughes asks if the same will happen to Faulkner. This introductory part of the text reveals the devastating conflict that was ruling every day life in the Southern states of the United States at that time. It displays the impossible practice of passing a law to protect certain members of society, and then appealing to the same group to act as if the law did not exist. The *Brown II* decision, as told above, actually gave southerners free hands in their dealings with African Americans. Hence the Federal Government was caught in a trap constituted by its own decisions. Hughes, though, chooses to ignore the *Brown II* decision. Again he is anticipating future progress, assuming that the law will treat Mr. Faulkner in the same manner as it treated Mr. Robeson. In presenting his view this way he is pretending to rely on the Federal Government to function as it is elected to do, according to “the Law of the Land”. It is a subtle sort of pressure, and it has often proved more effective than open criticism of the conditions at any given time. The comparison between Robeson and Faulkner turns out to be quite a deliberate choice. Hughes’s purpose is revealed when he expresses his wish that Mr. Faulkner should be allowed to keep

his passport. Otherwise he would be stuck in Mississippi, and Hughes wants him to go as far away as possible, “to the moon, Mars, or Venus” (*Chicago Defender* 91).

His next paragraph he uses to praise Faulkner as an “excellent writer and a sincere citizen” (*The Chicago Defender* 91). He does not doubt that Mr. Faulkner means what he says. What is incomprehensible to Hughes is why he is saying it. To emphasize his next attack he changes paragraphs again, and also his style of approach. Now he is surprised, taken aback, astonished, by Mr. Faulkner’s attitude, as if he did not have the slightest inkling that any enlightened person could nourish such feelings. Incredulously he asks: “Doesn’t he want me to go to school ever in life with the rest of the Americans in Mississippi? Am I a varmint or something that he wants me, colored, to wait and wait outside of the good life, while everybody else, white, Mexican, Oriental, native and foreign born, Jew or gentile, go to the university of Mississippi if they want but me?” (*The Chicago Defender* 91). Hughes, of course, was perfectly aware of the facts of life. Surveys made in 1940 showed a severe disparity between the American citizens’ constitutional rights and the reality in practice. In 1940 the number of white people with no schooling was 3,2 %, of non-whites 11,7%. Unfortunately, there is no data exclusively on blacks, only for the entire group of non-whites. However, from James A. Geschwender’s essay “Social Structure and the Negro Revolution”, we learn that the non-white population consisted of 90% blacks at the time of both surveys that I am referring to (*Black Americans* 454). The position of the non-whites may therefore be regarded as approximately that of the blacks. As for the ones who did go to school in 1940, 30,5 % of the whites went four years to elementary school, 11,4 % of the non-whites did. 13 % of the whites had four years at High-School, while only 3,8% of the non-whites were that fortunate. 5,9 % of the whites went to college for four years, a mere 1,4 % of the non-whites made it to that level. Even if the survey of 1960 shows improvement as both groups move upwards in the system, the differences between the races are almost unchanged. It shows 2%

whites with no schooling, 6,6 % non-whites. 22,1 % of the whites get four years at high-school, 11,7% of the non-whites. Four years at college is granted 10,3 % of the whites, and 3,4 % of the non-whites. These figures show that the non-whites are always lagging behind the whites in the upward climb. They reveal that the whites in general are moving from the middle to the top of the educational system, the non-whites move from the bottom to the middle. However, they also indicate that there is a marked progress towards equality between whites and non-whites in the lower age groups. This fact would inevitable manifest itself upward in the system as the pupils grew older, and lead to a situation where non-whites improved their educational accomplishments relative to the whites. It should be noted, though, that these surveys cover all of the US except Hawaii and Alaska. The situation in the segregation states in the South is not especially recorded. Still, at the time of his article in 1956, one is safe to assume that Hughes was painfully aware of the situation, both in the country in general and in the South in particular. With their practice of segregation in addition to the practice of the over all suppression of African Americans, the South doubtlessly contributed their fair share to the depressing statistics. Still, Hughes is ignoring the appalling everyday treatment of the blacks, and sticking stubbornly to his indisputable constitutional rights.

The rest of the text is in my opinion too emotional to be rated as high quality literature in any genre. It seems as if Hughes gets carried away on a wave of frustration. Again he goes to the extreme, and accuses Faulkner of being mad. In doing so he uses expressions which place him outside the ranks of sophisticated scholars, such as “he has blowed his top”, and “his wig is gone” (*Chicago Defender* 92). On the other hand, this could of course be intentional. By using these phrases he would endear himself to the uneducated black readers. Nevertheless, such language would alienate him from the white gentry of the South, and his appeal would have no effect unless he managed to reach that particular group of citizens.

However, with these expressions he identifies with the largest group of African Americans, the “commoners”. The phrases convey an important message. He is not just a writer in an elevated position in society. He is a representative of the frustrated masses.

Toward the end of the piece there is an interesting sentence. After wondering what would have happened to Mr. Faulkner in this situation if he were black, he answers the question himself: “He would be in jail, else investigated by Senator Estland’s committee, surveyed by the FBI, and called all the names in the book by the patriotic editorial writers who damned Josephine Baker to hell and gone for exaggerating a little about lynchings before the white gentry of Mr. Faulkner’s state dropped little Emmet Till in the river with an iron wheel tied to his feet” (*Chicago Defender* 92). Here, in one run-on-line Hughes manages to display the extent of incongruity between crime and punishment, working both ways. On the one hand, Mr. Faulkner, who has publicly declared that he is prepared to defy a constitutional law, even admitting that he is quite willing to commit murder, is not punished at all. On the other extreme there is Emmet Till, a fourteen year-old boy on a visit to relatives in Mississippi, in 1955. A Chicago boy, and not familiar with the conditions of the South, he allegedly whistled at a white girl. For this crime he was brutally murdered and thrown in the river, condemned to death without a trial. His murderers, though, two white men, were cleared by an all white jury (*Eyes* 37-38).

This section of the text is a reflection of Hughes’s upset mood. It is an emotional outburst, quite similar to “Hold Tight!”. By depicting Faulkner as a black man he is pointing mockingly to the malfunction of the American democracy. He leaves his readers with the impression of the South as a lawless, barbaric society. The expression “little Emmet Till” emphasizes the fact that the victim was a child. Thereby he marks the “white gentry”, the carriers of the sophisticated culture of the South, as brutes who are killing children. He is painting a picture of a society which is existing on false premises. The gentry are savage

killers. The esteemed author, the noble mind of the Nobel prize is a gunman, out on the streets killing people.

1958 was a watershed in the struggle for equality in the educational field in the South. That was the year when Ernest Green graduated from Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. This event took place on May 27nd, and on June 14th that year, Hughes comments on it in an exuberant article in the *Chicago Defender*. This article is yet another example of his variety in style.

The first ten lines, which constitute the introduction of the article, are composed “by the book”, with a presentation of the topic and the conflict. The topic is, of course, civil rights, and the conflict is the difficulty the black people have in putting those rights into practice. In order to emphasize the magnitude of the young man’s achievement he first points out that “in some parts of our country just average day-to-day living needs from the Negroes more courage and determination than it does from whites” (*Chicago Defender* 43).

At this point there is a marked change in style in the text. The first example is when he calls the diploma “a banner of singular glory”. This image gives associations to historic heroes at horse with their banners flying at the spearhead of a victorious army. It thereby classifies Ernest Green’s victory as one that turns the historic events, which it obviously did. From here on Hughes also starts to repeat the word “diploma”. All in all he does this twenty times. These images and repetitions give the text a distinctly lyrical quality. Parts of it appear more like a poem than like a piece of actual prose:

“The dim wonder of book learning in the minds of countless slaves  
who dared not touch a book for fear of flogging lies in that diploma . . .  
The tears of slave mothers who desperately wanted their children to learn  
moisten all the letters in Ernest Green’s diploma. His diploma is not an  
ordinary diploma. No! It is the diploma of all the people who  
remembered . . .” (*Chicago Defender* 44).

The depiction of the scene where Ernest Green receives his graduation paper is perhaps the most solemn part of the text. First he reminds his readers of “The Knights of the White

Circle” and “The Ku Klux Klan” and all the horror they inflicted on black people who tried to get some kind of education. Then he uses the image of “evening dew” to describe their sufferings: “And the dew of ancient pain moistened his diploma, and the tears of all the generations of enforced ignorance fell upon his hand as he reached out to accept the token of graduation, his diploma!” (*Chicago Defender* 44). The image of the dew that fell gently over the stadium conveys almost religious connotations. It becomes like a blessing from heaven of the ceremony, a token of gratitude from all those who lived and died without being granted this opportunity. Then he concentrates on the diploma itself, and describes it as a symbol of everything that has been done to make this moment possible. He manages to include all the various departments of society. The sweat of work and fear is rolled into the diploma, he says. In this connection he mentions both the physical workers and the great minds. The ribbon around the paper is the symbol of all the prayers in all the little churches in the South. The golden seal on the document is the symbol of song. This symbol represents all the congregations who gave offers to education, the professional singers who raised money for the cause, and the song of the black mother as she toiled over her washing to provide her children with an education. In this way he includes all aspects of life, work, religion and art. By reminding his readers of the fact that all levels of society have been involved in the struggle, he once again emphasizes the significance of education, and ends his jubilant script by proclaiming Ernest Green “the man of the year”.

In the struggle against segregation, this celebration of victory is just as important as the harsh attacks on maltreatment. The captivating form of the article leaves no reader unaffected. Hughes emphasizes the event, and thereby extends the effect of it. In addition he is keeping his audience informed about both progress and setback in the Civil Rights Movement. He proves to be a living source of both information and propaganda. Considering the numbers of readers of the *Chicago Defender*, Langston Hughes must have made a difference in this field. The

celebration of Ernest Green's diploma can therefore be seen as the marking of a private as well as a public victory.

## Conclusion

To study Langston Hughes has been a somewhat overwhelming process. I did not realise the immensity of his production until I started my research. Also the variety of his works is quite stunning. Between 1926, when he had his break through with *The Weary Blues*, and his untimely death in 1967, he wrote sixteen books of poems, two novels, seven collections of short stories, two autobiographies, five works of non-fiction, and nine children's books. In addition to this, he edited nine anthologies of poetry, folklore, short fiction, and humor. Furthermore, he translated Jacques Roumain, Nicholas Guillén, Gabriela Mistral, and Federico Garcia Lorca. He also wrote at least thirty plays (*Critics* ix). The nick-names which were used to describe him also tell of variation, both in genre and quality. It seems quite remarkable that such different expressions as "Shakespeare in Harlem", the "poet laureate of the Negro", and the "poet low-rate of Harlem" was used to classify one and the same person (*Critics* ix). The huge amount of literary work can only be a result of his unwavering dedication, which never seems to have slackened. In fact, it appears to thrive in times of trouble and adversity. After having finished my study of him I see him more clearly than ever as a pioneer in the matter of style, and a frontline fighter for the cause of the blacks. By using the "black voice" as a weapon in his fight for African American's rights, he managed to present the demand for just treatment in a very striking fashion. Because he employed the popular blues and jazz in his poetry, he identified its origin and forced the white population to recognize and appreciate the assets of the black culture. He thus clearly displayed the connection between the internationally celebrated music, and the culture of the blacks. Thereby he transformed the black masses from being "beggars at the back door", pleading for acceptable living conditions, to highly appreciated contributors with something precious to



offer. Through his poetry he displayed clearly the connection between the internationally celebrated music, and the culture of the African Americans.

It is not easily explained how this idea first came to him. He was not a “natural” himself. As stated above, he said himself that his reason for breaking up with the “Godmother” was that he was not in possession of that “primitive rhythm”. Still he managed to conquer the literate world with the rhythm of his poetry, and thereby communicate the mixture of pride and misery among black Americans. The blues and jazz form constantly reminded the reader that these much admired art forms are a prominent feature of the people that the whites regarded as inferior to themselves. The words carry an accusation of maltreatment, and a demand for change. In this fashion the message is given a double effect, in that it is conveyed in both the words and the style. In retrospect it seems such an obvious thing to do, because it turned out to be a success. However, at the time it was dismissed by many authorities in the realm of literature. In the preface to *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says: “Hughes, well before his compeers, Sterling Brown, and Zora Neal Hurston, demonstrated how to use black vernacular language and music – especially the blues and jazz – as a poetic diction, a formal language of poetry, and at a moment when other black writers thought the task fruitless at best, detrimental at worst. Indeed, so much of the best of the African-American literary tradition – Brown, Hurston, Ellison, Morrison – grows out of the vernacular into the very stuff of literature” (*Critics* x, xi). By this statement, Gates recognizes Hughes as a pioneer in the field of poetry. However, Gates is here talking about only one of Hughes’s tools. I find his variation in style, within the genres, most intriguing. This goes for both his poems and his articles in the *Chicago Defender*. The ability to adjust the mood of the text to its theme is, in my opinion, a characteristic with Hughes.

So much for his poetic talents. Another part of the puzzle is his, what must be called vocation, and his perseverance in pursuing it. As I have suggested earlier, the fact that he was an outsider was perhaps the direct cause of both. He might have been attracted by the exoticism of it all, enough to want to be part of it, without being able to fulfil the requirements for “membership”. In the same way his texts may be seen to be just a little removed from “the real thing”, with a sufficient touch of artificiality to add to their ability to excite their readers. Arnold Rampersad also seems to suggest something along those lines, in his review of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. He says that “his impressionistic recording of everyday life resulted from his impotence, his acknowledged sense of inferiority to the black masses from whom he took his voice” (*Critics* xi). It is essential in this connection that Rampersad regarded *Fine Clothes to the Jew* to be Hughes’s greatest achievement.

One of the most fascinating qualities of that part of Hughes’s production which I have examined is the actuality of the texts. Whether a poem or an article in the *Chicago Defender*, they always seem to coincide with some major event in his life or in the flow of history. His attacks on segregation policy and its effect on black American’s lives never seem to have ceased. This part of his work is an illustration of his alert awareness of current events in the march towards equality. To appreciate the stamina it took to keep on fighting, one has to recognize the setbacks and the slowness of the process.

The years between 1936 and 1959 are regarded as the time of the birth of the Civil Rights Movement. On a time line found on the Internet, Jesse Owens’s four gold medals in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, is marked as the first step in the movement. Further on, I notice with interest the importance of the artists in the progress. The painters, the musicians, and the writers represent most of the events during the 1930s. The next major achievement is obtained in connection with WWII, when the all-black 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron of the U.S. Army Air Corps was formed in 1941. Gradually, but slowly, doors which had formerly been

closed began to crack open during the 1940s. However, the first evidently major step forward was taken as late as in 1957, when the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. established the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This was the same year as President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered federal troops into Little Rock, Arkansas, after unsuccessfully trying to persuade Governor Orval Faubus to give up efforts to block desegregation at Central High School. The world, on a whole, may so far have been indifferent to the historical development which was taking place in the United States, but it was shaken awake by the massive march on Washington D.C. in 1963. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a Dream" speech is still on the syllabus of Norwegian highschool students.

In 1964, the bodies of three murdered civil rights workers, two white and one black, were found in Philadelphia, Mississippi. *Aftenposten* of 9 January 2005 brings the baffling news that now, forty years later, 79 year old preacher and saw-mill owner, Ray Killen, has been charged with the killings. He is accused of having recruited and organized the gang from the Ku Klux Klan that committed the murders. In my opinion this is a representative illustration of the stubborn resistance which has met the Civil Rights Movement. Two more major events followed in 1964. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law, and Martin Luther King Jr. was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The last major step forward that Langston Hughes was there to watch, was when Thurgood Marshall became the first African-American U.S. Supreme Court justice in 1967.<sup>6</sup>

Here stops the track of Langston Hughes. Thus far, all along, he was in the arena with his comments, raging, praising, lamenting, attacking. He was always alert to the latest step in the development, whether it went forwards or backwards. As we must acknowledge the immense impact of the artists in the struggle for equality, it is inevitable to picture him as an outstanding and more than average influential representative from that realm.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://search.eb.com/Blackhistory/era.do?nKeyValue=>

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## Abbreviations.

<i>BLC</i>	<i>Black Literature Criticism.</i>
<i>CLC</i>	<i>Contemporary Literary Criticism</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes.</i>
<i>Critics</i>	<i>L. Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present..</i>
<i>Reader</i>	Hughes, L. <i>The Langston Hughes Reader.</i>